

Douglas County can choose to help or hurt rural Colorado's communities

By Sarah Parmar, Colorado Open Lands

Water for the growth of Colorado's biggest cities has historically come at a cost to its rural communities through the practice of "buy and dry." Cities buy farms or other water rights used to irrigate fields and bring the water to the city, permanently drying up fields, and often, local economies along with them.

Colorado's Water Plan, created in 2015, reflects Coloradans' values by speaking to the necessity of finding balance in agriculture, environment, and growth as we evaluate our water future. The Plan prioritizes alternatives to "buy and dry" as cities look to meet new demands. It lays out more creative solutions that don't sacrifice our rural communities on the altar of growth.

Douglas County leadership is currently contemplating using federal stimulus funds to invest in long-term water supplies. It has received two drastically different proposals. One group proposes to buy and dry farms in the San Luis Valley, while the other proposes to capture water from the South Platte River that would otherwise leave Colorado.

Renewable Water Resources is a water development company that proposes to mine groundwater from the San Luis Valley and build a pipeline to carry it to the Front Range.

Douglas County, whose water insecurity stems from its reliance on waning groundwater, will surely see the futility in a proposal to pull from another depleted groundwater aquifer hundreds of miles away.

Douglas County has the highest median family income in the state. The six counties of the San Luis Valley are collectively in the lowest ten.* This water export would devastate an already economically disadvantaged area that is singularly dependent on its water to support its primary industry of agriculture.

Irrigated agriculture in the San Luis Valley and elsewhere does not just provide important food and fiber, it also provides wildlife habitat. Over 20,000 cranes stop in the valley on their biannual migrations. While visitors may flock to National Wildlife Refuges to see these majestic birds, it is working agricultural lands - barley fields made possible by irrigation - that provide these birds the necessary refuge and food to continue their migration.

Colorado Open Lands has worked to protect agricultural lands and water rights because we understand that continued irrigation in rural communities is the cornerstone of the ecology, economy, scenic views, and heritage that we all value as Coloradans. We work closely with the Rio Grande Water

Conservation District and its farmers and ranchers to voluntarily reduce groundwater irrigation (with compensation) to improve the health of the San Luis Valley's declining aquifers.

I am continually inspired by the sacrifices of San Luis Valley farmers and ranchers to preserve their community, wildlife, and the way of life they love by working toward aquifer sustainability.

Douglas County's alternative proposal comes from the Platte Valley Water Partnership, a collaborative partnership between Parker Water and Sanitation District and the Lower South Platte Water Conservancy District. Some would consider this to be an unlikely partnership because Parker Water has explored potential buy and dry in the past, while the Lower South Platte Water Conservancy District represents primarily agricultural users in four of Colorado's most northeastern counties.

The partnership would utilize high water events on the South Platte River and divert that excess water into reservoirs that can then be used by both cities and farmers and ranchers. The parties have agreed that there can be no water acquired through buy and dry of farms. By embracing the philosophy of creativity and collaboration supported by the Colorado Water Plan, these two entities

are finding common ground to fund a project that benefits agriculture, supports municipal need, and enhances wildlife habitat.

Those of us who live on the Front Range are not helpless to support the Colorado we want to see and the one we want to leave to our children and grandchildren. We can use water wisely and we can advocate that our elected officials make responsible choices about where our water comes from.

The citizens of Douglas County can choose to invest in a water future that cripples a rural community, or they can join Parker in leading the Front Range in a new direction - one that reflects the spirit of the Water Plan.

Robbing Peter's aquifer to water Paul's lawn isn't a solution. The best investment for Douglas County and for Colorado is in a cooperative water-sharing partnership that respects the economy, culture, and wildlife of two basins while getting Douglas County the water it needs to support its growth.

Colorado Open Lands is a private, non-profit land trust that exists to protect Colorado's land and water resources, working primarily with private landowners to place voluntary agreements called conservation easements on their property. www.coloradoopenlands.org