

Why Water Export Attempts Fail in the San Luis Valley

Renewable Water Resources' export scheme threatens agriculture, the economy and natural environment of the San Luis Valley.

FACT SHEET

Water Leaving the Valley is Bad for the Economy

Water that leaves the San Luis Valley threatens every facet of the local economy. Agriculture is the economic engine of the Valley and has ties to every other sector. "Exporting" water out of the basin to Front Range water users would mean less water available for irrigated agriculture.

There is zero unappropriated water in the basin. This means that all of the surface water and groundwater is being used by existing water users, with none available for transport outside the Valley. "Finding" water to export would require purchasing existing agricultural water rights, drying up farms and harming the economic viability of the region.

History of Failed Plans

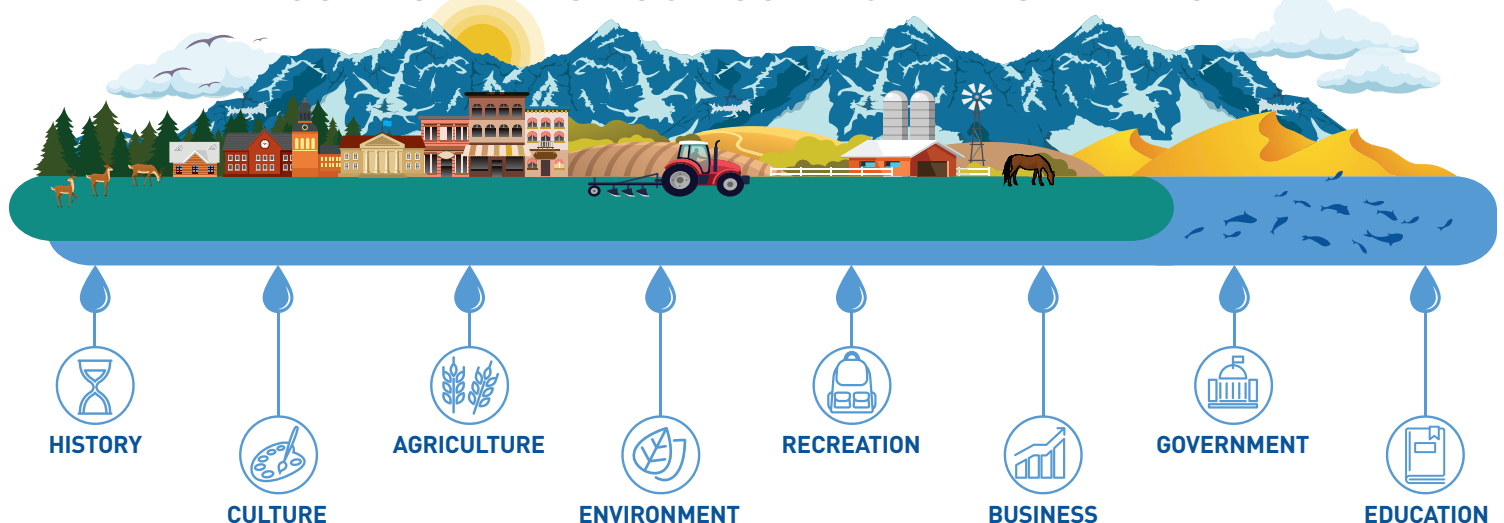
There have been several attempts to transport water out of the Valley and all have been defeated through the efforts of local water districts with the support of stakeholders including various San Luis Valley citizen groups. During the mid-1980s, American Water Development Inc. (AWDI) proposed selling 200,000 acre-feet of deep groundwater from its Baca Ranch to the Denver metro area.

Farming communities that have sold their water to cities have faced dire economic consequences.

In 1994, the Colorado Supreme Court upheld a district court ruling that pumping water out would adversely affect the shallow aquifer and surface water rights, shelving the ADWI plan.

In 1995, the Baca Ranch was sold to a group of investors headed by Gary Boyce of Stockman's Water. Boyce planned to pipe 150,000 acre feet per year to Denver. His proposal was likewise met with intense community opposition. When the Stockman's proposal was again denied by the courts, The Nature Conservancy stepped in and bought the Baca Ranch in 2002 from the Stockman's interests and sold it to the federal government to establish the Baca National Wildlife Refuge and the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. After Boyce's death, his estate sold another property, Rancho Rosado, located north of the Sand Dunes, to Renewable Water Resources (RWR).

EVERY COMPONENT OF OUR COMMUNITY IS TIED TO WATER



The Latest Attempt

RWR is now promoting the latest scheme through a plan to drill a number of new wells on Rancho Rosado, just north of the Baca National Wildlife Refuge. They aim to pump 22,000 acre-feet of water and pipe it over Poncha Pass. If delivered to the Front Range, this would contribute to population growth and development. The proposal is opposed by the Rio Grande Water Conservation District (RGWCD), San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District, Conejos Water Conservancy District, the Rio Grande Basin Roundtable as well as the City of Alamosa, Town of Del Norte, City of Monte Vista, Town of Saguache, environmental groups, local businesses, and many farmers and ranchers.

RWR has not filed an application with Colorado's water court and has not publicly identified any specific buyers for the water. Several notable Front Range water providers (i.e., Aurora Water, Colorado Springs Utilities, South Metro Water Supply Authority) have publicly stated or shared that they are not interested in participating in the ill-conceived project. This transbasin diversion is being proposed at a time when the Colorado political climate is not supportive of moving more water to the east slope of the Continental Divide from west slope and rural areas. Also, Colorado's Water Plan discourages "buy and dry" and is encouraging water sharing agreements with farmers instead. The plan says proponents shall work with the local community in the basin of origin and seek mutually beneficial agreements.

The Valley community is skeptical that the project would pump out only the 22,000 acre-feet of water currently proposed. Building a major pipeline is costly. Local water leaders believe that if the infrastructure is built, the RWR project would be just the start and lead to further attempts to extract water, leading to even greater losses for the region.

RWR's states it will provide 8,000 acre-feet of water to replenish the existing groundwater overdraft. But they have not said where or how the replacement water for their well pumping might be delivered. Buying more water to only "replace" water to be exported would dry up additional farmland. RWR also promises a community fund that many in the community believe will only benefit one county and will not go very far. The negative consequences to the agricultural economy and environment would be far more detrimental than the benefit of a one-time payment to one area of the Valley.

The RWR proposal would be just the start of water leaving the Valley and would open the door for others to buy and pipe its water to the Front Range.

Environmental Risks from RWR's Proposal

In addition, RWR's plans to pump deep groundwater water from a concentrated area could negatively impact the environment, including streams, rivers, a National Park, and wildlife refuges, fish and wildlife. Internationally important wetlands range across the Valley floor from the Baca National Wildlife Refuge in the north and south to the Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge, providing habitat for migratory birds, such as sandhill cranes and snowy plovers, amphibians and deer and elk.

Moreover, groundwater is a critical element in the stream systems that create and maintain the dunes at Great Sand Dunes National Park.¹ Given the connections between the aquifers and surface streams, there are questions to as to how significantly these natural resources would be impacted and the associated effects on the recreation and tourism industry.

RWR is attacking what is working well in the San Luis Valley — farmers coming together voluntarily to solve their own problems.

RWR Threatens Local Solutions

In response to recognition by local water users and state officials that groundwater use in certain parts of the basin is unsustainable, local leaders worked to pass legislation that allows communities within the Valley to aim to balance water use and supply. With the help of the RGWCD, farmers created self-governed Subdistricts. This allows them to sustainably manage the groundwater and guide their own destiny by solving problems locally. RWR's offers to buy water rights is an attempt to undermine that effort. See Fact Sheet on San Luis Valley Water for more information on the Subdistricts' innovative program.

The Subdistricts are hard at work, but their members face increasing challenges from a drying climate and challenging agriculture markets. RWR's project will put additional strain on the local economy, environment and communities, making successful aquifer recovery and sustaining agriculture operations and wildlife habitat even more challenging.

¹Sand Dunes decree, 04CW35, pg. 9.



Water Connects the San Luis Valley

#StopWaterExport

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