

Writers on the Range: Colorado conflicted about cutting its water use

March 9, 2023



In Colorado, farmers must enroll in a four-state program by March 1, if they want to get paid for fallowing their fields — perhaps the best option to plump up the Colorado River’s giant reservoirs, Mead and Powell.

Not everyone is a fan, including Andy Mueller, director of the Colorado River District. He doesn’t like programs that pay farmers to stop farming. Mueller also didn’t ask for the Inflation Reduction Act’s \$125 million to pay the farmers he represents. Mueller’s organization exists to keep Western Colorado’s rural water away from growing cities across the Rockies.

State Sen. Dylan Roberts, D-Avon, who chairs the Committee for Agriculture and Natural Resources, has a more nuanced view. He says he understands that rural communities fear a “buy and dry” scenario. Where annual leases become routine, and once-verdant fields and farms wither. He insists that any water leasing must be temporary, voluntary and well compensated.

A water-leasing program called demand management was created for Colorado irrigators under former Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper — it was tested, but never used. It would have allowed farmers to lease and store their water in a Lake Powell account under state control. Under Gov. Jared Polis' administration, however, demand management was quietly shelved.

Now, this new, multi-state program for leasing agricultural water, called a “system conservation pilot program,” isn't getting much traction. The program was announced two and a half months ago by Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming.

Its major drawback, says Tom Kay, an organic farmer in western Colorado, is that the Upper Colorado River Commission is offering a “stupid price of \$150 an acre-foot.”

“Farmers like to farm; you have to pay them more than they make farming to interest them,” Kay adds. He gets around \$650 per acre-foot of water growing mostly organic corn and dry beans on his 350-acre farm near the town of Hotchkiss.

Kay says he recently toured California's Imperial Valley, where farmers are getting \$679 an acre-foot. They sell their 200,000 acre-feet of Colorado River to the San Diego County Water Authority and consider the price reasonable.

Water prices are also rising. In California last summer, when the Bureau of Reclamation was looking hard for water, large irrigation districts in the Lower Basin were asking \$1,500 per acre-foot to lease their water to cities, reported Janet Wilson of California's Desert Sun.

If farmers got more money for their water under the new pilot program, says State Sen. Roberts, Colorado “could get more participation (and) show the federal government we are doing our part.”

He also says that many state legislators think California and Arizona should bear the brunt of water cuts.

Getting farmers to fallow their land could build resilience in the Colorado River Basin, says Aaron Derwingson of The Nature Conservancy. A few years ago, he worked with grower Kay and Cary Denison, formerly of Trout Unlimited, to develop an “organic transition” program whose concept was simple: Lease two-thirds of your water for three years so pesticides and fertilizers leach off the land, then apply for organic certification. The demand management trial was largely funded by the Bureau of Reclamation.

So the question remains: Why is the Upper Colorado River Commission offering farmers so little for their irrigation water? The commission's executive director, Chuck Cullom, explains: “\$150 per acre-foot was chosen to discourage drought profiteering.”

Kay guesses that the low price was set to discourage participation. While \$150 is the floor, and farmers can negotiate for more, commission representatives haven't gone to agricultural communities to beat the drum for its program.

Kay says, “That \$125 million is a lot of money, and it belongs to Upper Basin farmers.”

Meanwhile, in mid-November, 30 western cities agreed to cut “non-functional” turf grass by up to 36%, including big water guzzlers such as Utah’s Washington County, which wants to siphon more water out of Lake Powell.

What’s unclear is how much water from not watering grass stays in the river. Mueller points out that Aurora, a fast-growing Denver suburb, “is cutting water to sell more water taps. They’re building more houses.”

Kay admires Mueller’s rural leadership but thinks the way forward is clear: “Denver has a junior water right.

Why isn’t it paying us in western Colorado to fallow ground, just like what Los Angeles and San Diego are doing?”

Dave Marston is the publisher of Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He owns a small, irrigated parcel in Western Colorado.