

Guest Column: It's time to stop shipping water across the Rockies

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It was 1952 when the cities of Aurora and Colorado Springs first started gobbling up water rights in a remote, high mountain valley on the state's Western Slope. The valley is called Homestake, and now, those same cities want even more of its pure water.

In western Colorado, where only about 20% of Colorado's population lives, all water tries to flow toward the Pacific Ocean. On the east side, where most people live, water flows to the Atlantic. To bring the water from the west side to the east side of the Rockies requires lots of money and lots of pipelines.

But money isn't much of a barrier when your population is exploding: Colorado Springs, with 478,961 residents, and Aurora, with 386,261, need more water. And they aim to get it even if it must cross under the Continental Divide and damage a fragile and ancient wetland called a "fen" in the process.

The new reservoir the two cities plan to build would be five miles downstream from their existing Homestake Reservoir and called Whitney Reservoir after a creek that flows into Homestake Creek. There's

also a Whitney Park within the nearby Holy Cross Wilderness Area, which could lose some 500 acres if the new reservoir goes through.

But protesters are already active, and conservation groups are threatening lawsuits. Meanwhile, the cities have already quietly begun test drilling at four possible dam sites on U.S. Forest Service land along Homestake Creek.

Obstacles, however, are popping up. The Forest Service says it won't even consider a reservoir proposal that shrinks a wilderness area, and the cities would have to get that approval from both Congress and the White House.

The U.S. congressman for the district, rising Democratic star Joe Neguse, has also made it clear he doesn't support shrinking a designated wilderness or damaging wetlands. Local leaders are also chiming in: "A Whitney Reservoir would irreparably change and harm our community," said Minturn Mayor John Wideman and Red Cliff Mayor Duke Gerber, who co-wrote a letter to the Forest Service. Both represent small towns dependent on tourism and outdoor recreation.

State Sen. Kerry Donovan, a Democrat who grew up in the nearby ski town of Vail, also wrote the Forest Service to oppose the dam: "I cannot express how sternly the citizens of my district ... oppose water diversion projects to Front Range communities."

Another issue, and for some it's the most critical, is the fate of valuable "fen" wetlands that would be destroyed by a dam and reservoir. "This is one of the finest wetlands we can find on our forest — it's unbelievable," White River National Forest Supervisor Scott Fitzwilliams told Aspen Journalism in 2019. "You can mitigate, but you can't replace 10,000 years of work."

Nor can you turn the clock back to 1952, when Colorado's population was 1.36 million, compared to 5.7 million today, and the global land and ocean temperature was 1.52 degrees Fahrenheit cooler. Climate change, scientists say, will cause the Colorado River to lose *up to 31% of its historical flow by 2052. That prediction was a factor in a recent, first-ever federal water shortage declaration.*

"When Colorado Springs and Aurora got their water right, the [Holy Cross] wilderness wasn't there and wetlands at that time were something we were just filling in," said Jerry Mallett, president of the local conservation group Colorado Headwaters. "Since then (wetlands) have become an extremely valuable resource because of what they can do for groundwater recharge, addressing climate change — all kinds of things."

Then there's the issue of Kentucky bluegrass, Colorado's landscaping groundcover of choice. Kentucky gets more than 50 inches of rain a year compared to the Front Range average of 17, so why pump western Colorado's high-elevation water through the Rockies for lawns?

Colorado photographer and conservationist John Fielder, who says he's been just about everywhere within the nearly 123,000-acre Holy Cross Wilderness Area, wants people to just look at his images of the fen wetlands along Homestake Creek, and then ask themselves these questions:

“Is anything more sublime and fertile and life-giving than a 10,000-or-more-year-old fen wetland? You can’t “mitigate” the loss of ancient wetlands by creating a manmade wet place somewhere else. No more water to the Front Range.”

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