

Drought is draining

By Charlie Myers
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Slurp!

The sound you hear is water, and fish life, going down the drain at four key reservoirs in the South Platte River system in northeast Colorado.

As the Great 2000 Drought intensifies, you can kiss fishing goodbye at Jumbo Reservoir, a once-promising impoundment near Julesburg. If rain doesn't arrive soon, the same fate looms for Prewitt Reservoir, east of Brush.

At Jackson Lake, where the Colorado Department of Natural Resources recently agreed to pay the irrigation company \$2 million for long-term recreation water rights, the level may shrink to a shallow basin only 1½ feet deep covering fewer than 400 acres.

Only North Sterling, which retains a 7-foot-deep catchment near the outlet, holds much hope keep-

ing fish alive should the drought continue.

The dynamics are simple enough: Various irrigation companies own the water in reservoirs constructed to provide water for area crops. Water is reduced every year during growing season. During the occasional dry spell with little rain and lagging runoff storage, the bottom drops out, like pulling the plug from a bathtub.

"It's a bitter pill to swallow," said Jay Stafford, the Colorado Division of Wildlife biologist who, during the past several years, directed the development of these reservoirs into some of the most productive in the state.

Stafford now must preside over a process much like the lingering deaths of old friends.

"We'll try to do the best we can with whatever time we have," Stafford said.

The first — and worst — passing will come at Jumbo, which could

go dry by the end of the month. To prevent fish going to waste, all limits have been removed from the lake. Legal angling methods still apply, but Stafford said nets may be allowed when the water level reaches the critical stage.

Meanwhile, Stafford and his crews will attempt to salvage as many fish as possible and transfer them to Sterling.

The battle plan also calls for salvage from Prewitt to be moved to Jackson, along with fish rescued from the Jackson ditch.

Stafford endured a similar disaster at Jumbo in 1994, but successfully rehabilitated the reservoir in intervening years.

This spring, Jumbo quickly became an favorite for its eager saugeye, wipers, crappie, yellow perch and channel catfish.

"Catch rate had been as high as six to seven fish per hour. People were having lots of fun," Stafford said.

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prairie reservoirs

Lacking rain, Prewitt may expire by mid-August.

"It's still 80 percent full, but going fast," Stafford said.

A larger capacity might spare Sterling until the end of August. Jackson, too, is draining rapidly.

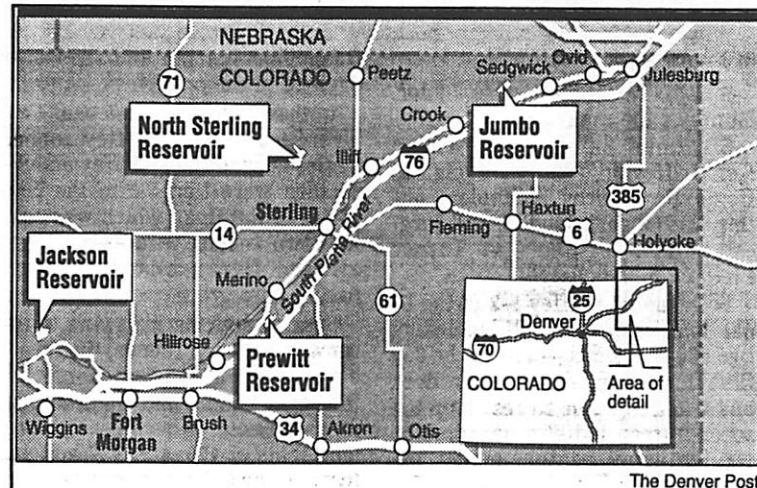
"You get these large doses of reality every now and then on the Colorado prairie," Stafford said. "We'll just start over next year. We can't give up."

Conditions appear much better in other parts of eastern Colorado, particularly the Arkansas River drainage, where biologist Charlie Bennett reports encouraging water levels.

John Martin Reservoir, largest in the region, shrunk 10 feet below maximum with a continuing release of 3,000 cubic feet per second.

"The Road 19 boat ramp still is usable and there's still plenty of water in the lake," said Bennett, who gave a similar report for Nee

NORTHEASTERN RESERVOIRS



Noshe Reservoir.

Bennett said fishing remains good at Nee Noshe for saugeye, crappie and largemouth, mostly at 10 feet deep around brush.

Nee Gronda Reservoir is brim full and anglers there are catching wipers in deeper water.

"Things could be a lot worse," Bennett said.