

80 Farm communities reviewing alternatives to outright water sales

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ROCKY FORD — Another water rights purchase is pending in the Arkansas Valley, and this one, if approved in state water court, will leave 3,000 more acres of farmland without water, cutting its value for local tax assessments by 98 percent.

So officials in this and nearby agricultural communities are exploring another option to the outright sale of water, mostly to industries or cities that have unquenched needs: an interruptible supply.

Under that concept, farmers and cities agree to share water: Farmers get to use it in wet years to grow their crops; cities get it in dry years and pay the farmers not to grow anything. Both sides get at least part of what they want, and depending on how the deal is structured, the ownership of the water doesn't have to leave rural communities forever.

The city of Aurora offered to consider setting up some kind of interruptible-supply arrangement with farmers when it negotiated for its last Rocky Ford Ditch purchase, according to Gerry Knapp, the city's

revegetation official. But Rocky Ford Ditch farmers wouldn't consider it, mostly because there were no specifics.

Bill Long of the Bent County Development Foundation remembers when Public Service Company of Co. bought most of the Las Animas Consolidated Canal in the late 1970s and early 1980s to provide water for a power plant. The plant never happened and Public Service has been stopped in court from moving the water away. Farmers lease the water, but they don't own it.

Long also remembers the unease caused when Colorado Interstate Gas tried to buy the Fort Lyon Canal earlier this decade. The sale, if it had gone through, might have wrecked land values and local economies in three counties, including his.

While the gas company was wrangling with farmers, community leaders were talking about what should be done. Ideas like interruptible supply got a lot of attention, but it all faded when the crisis did.