

Monday, April 17, 2000

In Colorado, water is a fiery topic

Draw the shades and send the children out of the room. We're about to utter the W-word — the surest way in Colorado politics to get into trouble.

No, not "Dubya" as in George W. Bush. W as in "wet." And "war," something the W-word has often triggered in the West.

Yep, it's time to talk about Water again.

There, I said it. Now, it's out of the closet and into the Colorado Legislature — where John the Lion Hearted Evans, R-Parker, will bring his SB 215 into the Senate State Affairs Committee today.

Actually, the committee's full name is State, Veterans and Military Affairs. That's appropriate because, as previously noted, any attempt to talk sense about water in Colorado usually leads to war.

Sen. John the Lion Hearted is a braver man than *moi*. This *moi* goes by the sobriquet of Bob the Chicken Hearted in the pundit community because I've been burned by writing about water before. And hold your e-mails, mixed-metaphor denouncers — if you don't think you can be burned by water then you, friend, have never written about water in Colorado, The State That Never Plans Ahead.

That's what Sen. John the Lion Hearted is trying to get our state to do — to plan ahead so that the next time we have a major drought we won't rush out and do very expensive and very environmentally damaging things. The problem is that there are reasons Colorado never plans ahead, primarily the fact that we would rather beat each other over the head and nether regions with large oaken cudgels.

Exhibit A is the last big foray into water planning, the Metropolitan Water Supply Investigation, initiated in 1993. How can I say Colorado doesn't plan ahead when that study was funded "to explore cooperative solutions to future metropolitan area water supply needs that would minimize the conflicts often associated with development of large-scale water supply infrastructure such as transbasin diversion projects?"

Well, consider this statement: "By design, the MWSI did not explore new water



**BOB
EWEGEN**

development projects involving significant new infrastructure, nor did it examine the potential savings from additional water conservation programs."

That's like me refereeing the next Colorado Rockies game. But by design, there are two things I won't do: I won't call balls and I won't call strikes.

But if you need an opinion as to whether Babe Ruth's pitching was so good he'd have made the Hall of Fame if he'd never hit a home run, I'm there for you, fans.

The MWSI was allowed to explore four useful areas:

■ **Conjunctive use.** The prime example is the effort by Douglas County, the Denver Water Board and Western Slope experts studying the possibility of bringing water under the Colorado Divide in wet years and using it to recharge Douglas County aquifers drained in dry years.

■ **Effluent management.** This is a delicate way of stating that we could drink our sewage. Squeamishness aside, there's no reason not to do that because effluent can be purified to standards well above those in our current supplies. Unfortunately, the practice of dumping our effluent back into the rivers has allowed downstream users to establish rights on those return flows. Thus, there are limited legal possibilities for consuming the water we now dump back into the Platte.

■ **Interruptible supplies.** With such plans, cities buy agricultural water from farmers in times of drought. In wet years, when cities don't need the water, farmers can continue irrigating.

■ **"Other systems integration opportunities."** Bureaucratese for encouraging the various water entities to work together for more efficient overall results.

These are, in varying degrees, good and useful ideas. But all four together would

fall far short of yielding the 300,000 acre-feet of water for domestic and commercial purposes that the Front Range is expected to need by 2020, if it adds the projected one million new residents for a total population of 3.5 million.

To close that gap will thus require one or both of the "unmentionables" excluded from the MWSI study, more conservation and/or more "infrastructure" — i.e., dams and diversion projects. Evans' SB 215 would thus direct the Colorado Water Conservation Board to develop a plan by 2002 for a project that would increase water supplies on both the Western and Eastern slopes. Specifically, Evans wants the board to produce a plan that would divert 120,000 acre feet of the 450,000 acre feet of Colorado water that now flows unused to downstream users every year to serve the water-short Front Range. In addition, Evans bill would provide up to 40,000 acre feet of additional surplus Colorado River water to be stored for exclusively Western Slope users.

The proposal has spawned the usual outrage on the Western Slope, where residents are denouncing another Front Range raid on "their" water. But the Colorado Constitution specifies that water belongs to the people of the state — all the people — and not just those who happen to live close to ample supplies.

Environmentalists who join Western Slopers in loathing diversions will reply hotly that we need to explore the other taboo subject in the MWSI — increased conservation. They are, of course, right. But that's just one more reason we need to expand the water dialogue beyond the cramped parameters of the MWSI study.

Actually, I may have been wrong to predict Evans' bill would rile the Western Slope. My readers in Colorado West report they're so pleased with John the Lion Hearted that they're heading to Denver for a formal banquet at which he'd be the guest of honor.

At least, I guess it's a formal banquet. I heard them muttering something about a "necktie party."

Bob Ewegen (bewegen@denverpost.com) is deputy editorial page editor of The Post. He has written on state and local government since 1963.