

Rocky Ford 80 farmers ditch agriculture

By Deborah Frazier

News Staff Writer

Water — not cantaloupes, corn and onions — brought \$17 million to more than 100 Rocky Ford Ditch Co. owners who sold the irrigation rights to Aurora.

The thirsty suburb will use the water in bathtubs and on lawns, in swimming pools and businesses. And Aurora will help the farmers plant native grasses on the 3,000 acres where grains and garden vegetables have grown for a century.

For the farmers who grew 10 percent of the state's cantaloupe crop, the windfall will pay off debts from the last few years of miserable prices, start businesses and, in some cases, pave the way to a comfortable retirement.

None of the farmer-ditch owners contacted would comment on the sale because their friends and neighbors will lose stores, jobs and school funds with the disappearance of \$3 million to \$4 million a year in crop sales.

"If you'd brought this up at a meeting 10 years ago, there are people that would have boxed your ears," Joel Lundquist, a farmer, said. He owns shares in the local High Line Water Canal, which is voting on selling that water to a suburb.

"These baby boomer whiners say it's a tough time," said Lundquist, who opposes water sales out of Rocky Ford. "A lot of them are younger kids who had things handed to them."

That's not what Gerald Knapp, manager of Aurora's Arkansas Valley Range Project thinks. Aurora, through last week's purchase and a water rights sale in 1989, now owns nearly all the Rocky Ford ditch water.

"Those farmers came to Aurora and asked us if we'd be interested," Knapp said. "The whole agricultural economy is in the pits, and that's what drove this sale. Grain prices are as low as they were in the Great Depression."

Knapp said Aurora will help the community switch economies by paying \$10,000 or more a year to help replace the taxes farming would have paid. And the suburb is looking at ways to foster economic development.

"These things need to be done with water sales," Knapp said. The vacant farmland will also be replanted to prevent erosion and allow wildlife and livestock grazing.

The loss is greater than that, according to Mike Bartola, a horticulturist at Colorado State University's research station at Rocky Ford.

"The tragedy is that some of the most productive agricultural land in the state is going to be lost forever, and we're going to regret that," he said.

"Aurora and the metropolitan area are trying to manage growth, but this is like throwing gasoline on those fires," Bartola said.