

# 80 Shareholders dig in for sale decision

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**R**OCKY FORD — Shareholders still have several weeks to decide if they will accept Aurora's offer to buy their water rights in the Rocky Ford Ditch.

Aurora wants to buy the remaining 44 percent of the ditch's water in order to move it to the growing metro city. It has offered farmers and other shareholders approximately \$56,000 per share for their rights in the irrigation ditch.

The sale would yield about 5,000 acre-feet of water to Aurora and cost the city about \$20 million.

Aurora owns the other 56 percent of the ditch, having bought it in the mid 1980s. It bought about 4,000 acres of farm ground, of which most has now been revegetated with grass. About 3,300 acres is owned by the non-Aurora shareholders, termed minority shareholders.

According to Otero County land records, about half the land irrigated by the ditch is owned or controlled by a half dozen farming families: the Holder, Proctor, Gardener, Mameda and Aschermann families or individuals. The vast majority of the ditch's 65 shareholders are families and individuals with less than 20 acres or only small residential plots.

A small proportion of the canal's shares are owned by public entities, which have already said they won't sell. The city of Rocky Ford owns 13 shares and the Colorado Board of Agriculture owns 12 shares used by the Arkansas Valley Research Center for agricultural research.

The Rocky Ford Ditch is one of the oldest irrigation canals in the region, making its water rights some of the best because they get priority for use above most others. The ditch allots one share of ownership per 10 acres of land irrigated by the canals.

Shareholders were sent copies of Aurora's sales contract the second week in August and were given 30 days to decide if they would sell.

Ron Aschermann, one of the larger shareholders and leader of the sales effort, said the shareholders will have another "two or three" weeks to make their decisions and hand in signed contracts.

The sale, if it happens, may not affect irrigated agriculture in the area much because many of the larger shareholders also farm land under neighboring canals. Some have said they plan to sell their water and use the money to keep farming their other fields. Some also said they may continue farming their Rocky Ford Ditch land with water from wells.

Owners of less than three shares would get paid immediately under the terms of Aurora's sales contracts. Owners of larger numbers of shares would have options of longer pay-outs that begin after Aurora has won legal right to the water.

The sale would make millionaires of several large shareholders, at least before any applicable taxes. Aurora's sales contract said the city "intends" for the interest on long-term pay-outs to be tax-free, but won't guarantee it.

The deal could close as early as mid-2001.