

Some legacy 80

WHEN THE city of Aurora comes a-calling in the Arkansas Valley, it's with the intention of buying water and shipping it north out of this basin. And being a fast-growing, affluent suburb of Denver, it has deep pockets.

So it is tempting for the owners of the remaining 44 percent of Rocky Ford Ditch water to consider Aurora's recent offer of about \$56,000 per share for their rights in the canal. While Aurora could not take all of the water out of this basin, only the consumptive use, that still would mean about 5,000 acre-feet less water in the river each year.

That's because Aurora would try to take the water out of the river not at Rocky Ford but close to the headwaters where diversion capabilities already exist. And water near the headwaters is much different than water that currently flows into the Rocky Ford Ditch.

Water near the top of the stream has few contaminants. As the river flows down through mountain canyons and then across Southeastern Colorado's prairies, it picks up contaminants in various areas.

Of course, that's natural. But as more clear water is taken out near the top of the stream, there is less dilution as the water arrives at any given point downstream.

The effects of taking 5,000 acre-feet from the stream probably would not be disastrous, but if other sales and upstream diversions were made in the future, the results could be substantial.

Otero County land records show that about half the land irrigated by the Rocky Ford Ditch is owned or controlled by a half dozen farming families, who would share in about half of the \$20 million Aurora is offering. The rest of the shareholders are those with small plots or the city of Rocky Ford and the Arkansas Valley Research Center. The publicly owned shares are not for sale.

It is ironic that the farmers who are considering selling their water out of the basin are part of the Southeastern Colorado Conservancy District, which manages the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project water that is diverted from the water-rich Western Slope.

One thing people should remember: If the water is sold to Aurora, it will never come back to Southern Colorado.

That's not a pretty legacy.