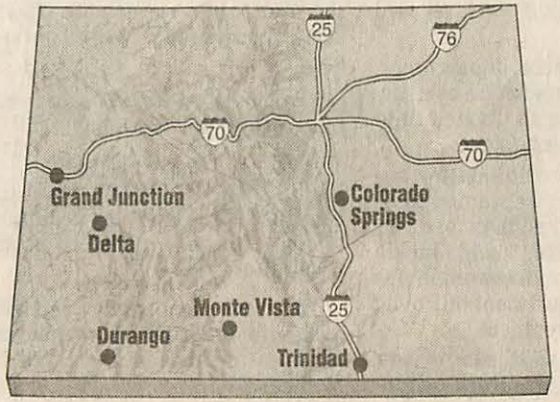
COLORADO

An eye on ...

These are among the cities and towns covered in today's Colorado page:



WESTERN EMPIRE

FRONT RANGE

County gets Penrose center

COLORADO SPRINGS — The city has agreed to give Penrose Stadium and Equestrian Center — and the potential liability that goes with it — to El Paso County.

Since 1926, the 145-acre site has been owned by the city. Since 1973, the city has leased the facility to the county for $1 a year. The transfer in ownership is expected to be approved by com-

Engineer sounds valley aquifer alarm

By Mark H. Hunter
Special to the Denver Post

A well-respected water engineer has warned San Luis Valley farmers that if they don't work together to put as much water back into the aquifer as they pump out, a water shortage could eventualiy result.

"There is an urgent need for consideration of higher levels of water management," Alan Davey advised more than 100 farmers at the 16th annual Southern Rocky Mountain Potato, Grain Conference on Thursday. Davey said he'd like to see the dozens of ditch companies and hundreds of water users cooperate to head off this potential problem.

"There is a good possibility that we are increasing the number of irrigated acres," he said. "If that trend continues, there will be a water shortage. It is an alarming trend I see. I hope I'm just crying 'wolf' and there is no wolf. But it concerns me."

Since 1975, Davey has measured the aquifer's monthly rise and fall in 27 monitoring wells. "Keep the water in the wells, especially in the Closed Basin area," he said.

The Closed Basin is a geologic formation under the northeastern part of the valley, near the Great Sand Dunes. Snowmelt from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains drains into it — but not out — at least on the surface.

Taking water from the Rio Grande for surface irrigation began in the 1890s, Davey explained. But only since the 1950s have officials compared pumping water from the aquifer to replacing, or "recharging" it with surface water from ditches.

The aquifer showed "significant declines" during the 1970s from farm sprinkler system pumping, he said. But in the 1980s, after water users began to seriously recharge the system, it stabilized. Davey's latest measurements,

MONTE VISTA

taken in December 1998, showed an overall decrease of about 200,000 acre-feet from 1997.

An acre-foot of water is enough to cover an acre of land to a depth of one foot, approximately 327,000 gallons. An average Colorado family uses about an acre-foot of water a year.

Davey suggested farmers and ranchers put as much surface water as they can back into the aquifer. The digging of new recharge "pits," or small ponds where surface water soaks back into the ground, is something to consider, he said. Davey also asked farmers to use surface water as much as possible in their sprinklers to save the underground water.

Ray Wright, president of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District, reported on a "Rio Grande Restoration Project" plan among water users, environmentalists, and state and federal agencies concerning the river's health.

"The river's ability to fulfill its functions to serve anybody has been seriously degraded in the past several years," Wright reported. He outlined where clogged ditch headgates have caused erosion problems and discussed where gravel bars have built up in the river channel and changed the flows.

"The degradation of the channel has been detrimental. But the good news is that the Army Corps of Engineers won't get involved, they don't have any money," he said, getting a laugh from the audience, which had a low regard for that government agency.

The Restoration Project's goals: deliver Rio Grande Compact water to New Mexico and Texas, ensure that ditches get enough water, restore riparian areas and address wildlife and recreation issues. A $200,000 state allocation to continue the project is under discussion in the Legislature, he said.

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