

POWER forum addresses water shortfalls

Panel confirms: 'Drought not over'

Alan Wartes

While the worst drought in Colorado history has eased a little since this time last year, it is far from over. That was the message heard last Thursday by about 100 people who attended a public forum sponsored by POWER. The event was organized to educate Gunnison County residents about some of the realities of coping with dry times.

The panel of speakers included Frank Kugel, of the Division of Water Resources; Kathleen Curry, Manager of the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District; Ken Coleman, Director of Public Works for the city of Gunnison; and local rancher and Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District member Ken Spann.

"We are in a drought," said Kugel in his opening remarks to the crowd. "The five previous years have had below normal precipitation and we are expected to have a sixth of below normal stream flows. That has caught up with us in terms of ground water and soil moisture."

Kugel's job is to administer the state's water priority system. Water rights are assigned on a "first come, first served" basis. In wet years, there is enough water for everyone with a decreed right, but in times of drought many senior water users do not get the full amount to which they are entitled; then they place a call. Under these conditions Kugel must begin curtailing junior water

users - that is, shutting them off - until senior decrees are met.

According to Kugel, without significant precipitation in the spring and summer, the likelihood of calls on the river is very high. The two major senior users downstream are the Uncompahgre Valley Water User's Association and the Redlands Water and Power Co. near Grand Junction. Together they hold rights to 1,850 cubic feet per second. Presently, the Gunnison River is flowing at only 560 cfs near Gunnison.

Most household water comes from wells that are "exempt" from administration, or immune from curtailment. However, the state has identified some wells that can and will be curtailed in the future when calls are placed. According to Kugel, he will administer the following types of wells:

- Wells that have a non-functional augmentation plan. For example, if the augmentation pond doesn't hold water, or the plan is based on a junior water right that has been curtailed.

- Wells with rights that have been transferred, or are an alternate point, from a junior ditch.

- Wells with permits that refer to a specific decree under the permit conditions.

- Non-exempt wells within 100 feet of a live stream.

- Exempt wells exceeding the terms and limitations of the permit, such as homeowners with a household use only permit, that are using the well to water a lawn.

The five previous years have had below normal precipitation.

Frank Kugel

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The good news is that the UGRWCD has acquired water from Blue Mesa Reservoir that can be purchased for augmentation. The district purchased 500 acre feet from the Bureau of Reclamation and will sell it in 0.5 acre foot increments to anyone in need. For the time being, purchased water cannot be used for outdoor purposes, but that will change July 1.

This water can be used to meet downstream calls. However, augmentation from Blue Mesa will be of no help to meet internal calls; that is those that are placed by local senior right holders.

"The (UGRWCD) board is very committed to try and address that situation," said Curry. "That's why they have signed a contract to purchase Long Lake. There have

been a lot of folks potentially out of priority. We are really just getting that off the ground to use the lake for (augmentation)."

Long Lake (also known as Meridian Lake) lies above Crested Butte and is scheduled to become available by mid-summer for water sales to homeowners and subdivisions in the lower East River valley.

Ken Coleman informed the crowd that the city of Gunnison has water rights that are very senior to any of the calling entities. In addition he stated that the water department has seen no decline in the output of the nine wells operated by the city.

City water tanks above Western State College have a capacity of 2 million gallons, and city wells produce an average of 1.2 million gallons per day. With a per capita usage of around 90 gallons per person per day, the city is on par with other municipalities.

Ken Spann brought a unique perspective to the forum since he is both a Gunnison Basin rancher and the owner of a farm in Delta County.

"I've been on both ends of this whip," he said, referring to downstream calls. "It is always a gut wrenching decision to place a call, because you know the impact it will have."

Warmer weather has increased the amount of water in the river, postponing downstream calls for now. For more information about purchasing augmentation water, or on the status of potential calls, contact the UGRWCD at 641-7612, or 641-6065.

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