

Rocky Ford farmers ready to sell water

80 By JAMES AMOS
The Pueblo Chieftain

ROCKY FORD — It's too early to know the exact effects of Aurora's offer to buy the rest of the Rocky Ford Ditch, but the uneasiness already has started.

Mayor Jim Sandoval said Monday that Rocky Ford relies heavily on agricultural work-

ers and related sales for some of its tax revenue. If ditch shareholders sell their water, that likely would dry up both the land and some of that tax money.

"It's going to hurt," Sandoval said.

Shareholders are scheduled to formally receive Aurora's offers sometime late this week, then they'll have about 30 days

to decide whether to sell their water. Aurora already owns a little more than half of the Rocky Ford Ditch.

Aurora is offering a net price of about \$54,000 per share for the ditch's remaining 333 shares, held by about 60 shareholders. The sale would yield about 5,000 acre-feet of water to Aurora. (An acre-foot is enough water to cover 1 acre of

land with 1 foot of water.)

Water sales are nothing new in the lower Arkansas Valley.

Sales to Colorado Springs and Aurora in the 1980s dried up significant portions of Crowley County, devastating the local economy. Colorado Interstate Gas tried to buy a majority of the huge Fort Lyon Canal in the early 1990s but failed to get enough sellers.

Now, local farmers apparently are considering selling their water because agriculture hasn't been good to them for the past several years. A number of people knowledgeable about area farming, who declined to be identified, predicted Monday that they think most of the remaining 333 shares in the canal will sell.

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"The word is, it's going to happen," said one local bank official who declined to be identified.

Ron Aschermann, a shareholder leading the sale attempt, agreed.

"I sense it'll be a pretty big share that sells," he said. "But you never know until they sign."

The Aurora offer highlights the division such water sales impose on a community. Selling off the water often isn't good for a community, yet individual water rights owners often need to sell and have every legal right to do so.

"I'm torn," said chamber of commerce president Megan Hancock, who has family members who farm and ranch in the area. The sale, if it happens, could have "scary" consequences for Rocky Ford, she acknowledged.

But "we don't understand their circumstances," she said of farmers considering Aurora's offer.

Rocky Ford may not be as hurt by the sale as Crowley County was in the 1980s' sales. Darryl Schulz, a former Rocky Ford administrator, said several other irrigation canals near the town also provide agricultural tax base.

In the Crowley County sales, the water being sold was from the only canal in the area.

While farmers like Aschermann have made up their minds, other aren't sure yet.

"We're still looking at it," said Colorado Produce owner Don

Mameda, whose family owns Rocky Ford Ditch water.

Certain not to sell are the city of Rocky Ford itself and Colorado State University, which owns the Arkansas Valley Research Center. The city uses its water to replace what is pumped by wells. The research center uses its water for crop research and has for more than 100 years.

The deal offered by Aurora is based on a consumptive-use figure of 1.76 acre-feet per acre, a figure used in the last Aurora water buy here.

That figure will be recalculated based on a new engineering study to be conducted after the contracts are signed. If the study shows a lower water yield, the sellers can back out of the agreement.

That consumptive-use figure is likely to be the focus of whatever opposition surfaces to the sale. Entities such as the city of Rocky Ford and Colorado State University are certain to double-check that enough water will be left in the ditch to carry their water to them.

People who own water rights can sell only the consumptive use of their water rights, which is the amount of water actually used by their crops. The rest, which seeps into the ditch banks or ground or washes off the field and flows to the river, can't be sold because water users downstream depend on it.