

December 9, 2012

Water Piped to Denver Could Ease Stress on River

By FELICITY BARRINGER

The federal government has come up with dozens of ways to enhance the diminishing flow of the Colorado River, which has long struggled to keep seven states and roughly 25 million people hydrated.

Among the proposals in a report by the [Bureau of Reclamation](#), parts of which leaked out in advance of its expected release this week, are traditional solutions to water shortages, like decreasing demand through conservation and increasing supply through reuse or [desalination](#) projects.

But also in the mix, and expected to remain in the final draft of the report, is a more extreme and contentious approach. It calls for building a pipeline from the Missouri River to Denver, nearly 600 miles to the west. Water would be doled out as needed along the route in Kansas, with the rest ultimately stored in reservoirs in the Denver area.

Experts say the plan is reminiscent of those proposed in the middle of the last century, when grand and exorbitant federal water projects were commonplace — and not, with the benefit of hindsight, always advisable.

The fact that the Missouri River pipeline idea made the final draft, water experts say, shows how serious the problem has become for the states of the Colorado River basin. “I pooh-poohed this kind of stuff back in the 1960s,” said Chuck Howe, a water policy expert and emeritus professor of economics at the University of Colorado, Boulder. “But it’s no longer totally unrealistic. Currently, one can say ‘It’s worth a careful look.’ ”

The pipeline would provide the Colorado River basin with 600,000 acre-feet of water annually, which could serve roughly a million single-family homes. But the loss of so much water from the Missouri and Mississippi River systems, which require flows high enough to sustain large vessel navigation, would most likely face strong political opposition.

“If this gets any traction at all, people in the flyover states of the Missouri River will scream,” said Burke W. Griggs, the counsel for the Kansas Agriculture Department division of water resources. But, he added, the proposal “shows you the degree



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short entities in the Colorado River basin are willing to go to get water” from elsewhere, rather than fight each other over dwindling supplies, as they have intermittently for about a century.

The new report addresses the adequacy of water supplies over the next 50 years in the Colorado basin, which includes the central and southern Rocky Mountains, the deserts of the Southwest and Southern California. The study, the officials said, will serve as a road map for future federal action in collaboration with the Colorado River basin states.

The Denver Post described the pipeline option in an [article](#) last week.

As far as future water supplies go, the outlook is not good. Most Colorado River water is currently used for agriculture, but that is beginning to shift as the cities of the Southwest continue to grow.

The effects of [climate change](#) could result in less precipitation over the Rockies, further stressing the supply.

Existing agreements among the states that depend on the river oblige those in the upper basin (including Colorado, Utah and Wyoming) to provide a specified amount of flow downstream. The fear, Professor Howe said, is that there will not be enough Colorado water for all, and that downstream states like Arizona and California will nonetheless call for their usual deliveries from the upstream states, renewing old water wars.

To avert that, new sources of supply or a sharp reduction in demand would be required.

Rose Davis, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Reclamation, said that during the course of the study, the analysis done on climate change and historical data led the agency “to an acknowledged gap” between future demand and future supply as early as the middle of this century.

That is when they put out a call for broader thinking to solve the water problem. “When we did have that wake-up call, we threw open the doors and said, ‘Bring it on,’ ” she said. “Nothing is too silly.”

Jason Bane of Western Resource Advocates, a conservation organization based in Boulder, Colo., described the Missouri pipeline option as “fundamentally 20th-century water-policy thinking that doesn’t work in the 21st century.” He added, “We clearly need to conserve and be more efficient with the water we have.”

It is unclear how much such a pipeline project would cost, though estimates run into the billions of dollars. That does not include the cost of the new electric power that would be needed (along

with the construction of new generating capacity) to pump the water uphill from Leavenworth, Kan., to the front range reservoirs serving Denver, about a mile above sea level, according to Sharlene Leurig, an expert on water-project financing at Ceres, a nonprofit group based in Boston that works with investors to promote sustainability.

If the Denver area had this new source of water to draw on, it could reduce the supplies that come from the Colorado River basin on the other side of the Continental Divide.

But Mr. Griggs and some federal officials said that the approval of such a huge water project remained highly unlikely.

Ms. Leurig noted that local taxpayers and utility customers would be shouldering most of the expense of such a venture through their tax and water bills, which would make conservation a more palatable alternative.