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program unlikely to move needle in Powell Western Slope projects are small and involve agriculture Twitter Facebook

Water saved through upper-basin

by **Heather Sackett** May 12, 2023

WATER



River Commission's 5-Point Plan, announced in July and aimed at protecting critical elevations in Lake Powell and Lake Mead, which have fallen to record-low levels in recent years because of overuse, drought and climate change. System conservation will take place in the four upper Colorado River basin states — Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming and Utah — and will pay water users to cut back. It's being funded by \$125

the program overall won't be enough to rescue depleted reservoirs.

scale in a federally funded program to conserve water, and the amount of water saved by

The rebooted System Conservation Program was one of the legs of the Upper Colorado

million from the federal Inflation Reduction Act. The total water estimated to be saved across the upper basin for this year of the restarted, temporary and voluntary System Conservation Program is nearly 39,000

acre-feet. By comparison, Lake Powell when full holds more than 23 million acre-feet;

Ruedi Reservoir, on the Fryingpan River, can hold about 100,000 acre-feet. (An acre-

foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre of land to a depth of 1 foot and can

supply one to two households a year.)

Becky Mitchell, Colorado commissioner to the UCRC, said in a UCRC meeting last month that although the upper basin will do its part in response to last summer's calls from the federal government that the seven Colorado River basin states needed to conserve 2 million to 4 million acre-feet of water, the majority of that needs to come from cuts in the lower basin (California, Arizona and Nevada). "(System conservation) will not resolve the crisis in the reservoirs," she said.

Last month the UCRC approved moving forward with executing agreements with

program participants, which are still being finalized.

communities.

City

Source: CWCB

application.

savings.

season instead of January."

1,200

1,000

200

water.

wisely.

h.

Conservation district concerns

Amount of water saved by project

had a line drawn in the sand and so did I."

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Credit: Laurine Lassalle - Aspen Journalism

Duchesne

water conserved," Cullom said.

according to information provided by UCRC.

[40]

Although a goal of the program was to get participation across all water sectors agricultural, municipal and industrial — all of the projects proposed in Colorado involve Western Slope agriculture. None of the state's Front Range water providers, which collectively take about 500,000 acre-feet per year of the Colorado River's headwaters across the Continental Divide to thirsty cities and farms, are participating. Paying water users to irrigate less has long been controversial on the Western Slope,

with fears that these temporary and voluntary programs could lead to a permanent "buy

Of the four upper basin states, Colorado has the largest number of projects (29) but the

Colorado's participants are proposing small projects. UCRC Executive Director Chuck

Cullom said if the program is undertaken again, officials may consider a minimum size

"From a practical standpoint of the cost of monitoring and administering a verification

program for that (small number of) acres may not pencil out relative to the amount of

least amount of saved water (3,532 acre-feet). This is an indication that most of

requirement because doing very small projects may not be worth it.

and dry" situation that would negatively impact rural farming and ranching

Of the 29 Colorado projects, most involve reducing water use for forage crops, according to information provided by UCRC. Eight involve fallowing grass hay as part of a cow-calf operation, saving 1,163 acre-feet of water; seven plan to fallow alfalfa and save 1,029 acre-feet; and eight propose switching to less-thirsty crops, saving 791 acre-feet. The UCRC received 88 proposals across the four states, 72 of which met the qualifying

criteria. Utah has 20 projects that meet preliminary criteria; Wyoming has 22 and New

Mexico has one. The UCRC's opening offer was \$150 per acre-foot of saved water, but

the average compensation will probably end up being higher - \$434 per acre-foot,

System Conservation Pilot Program (SCPP) projects by basin

Denver Price Parker Colorado, Plateau Creek and Lower Colorado Limon Castle Dale Roaring Fork and Junction Colorado North Fork 70 Lower Gunnison Fountain Moab Gunnison Salida Cañon City Pueblo Uncompangre

Upper Colorado

Fort Morgan

Longmont

La Junta Monticell Polores Project Center Blanding Walsenburg Alamosa Pagosa 2023 Mapbox © OpenStreetMap Durango **Number of projects**

GVWUA, whose Highline Canal delivers water to roughly 24,000 acres of farmland on the north side of the valley between Grand Junction and Mack, withdrew its application from the process after manager Tina Bergonzini said she couldn't come to an agreement on the price with the UCRC. GVWUA had rejected the concept of paying farmers based on an amount of unused water, instead proposing to pay farmers for each acre of land they took out of production. Individual farmers would have had to apply to the program through the association, which proposed to cap total member participation at 1,000 acres and 3,000 acre-feet of water. GVWUA was asking for between \$686 and \$1,306 per each acre fallowed, depending on whether farmers reduced water use during the entire irrigation season or just part of it.

Bergonzini said the price represents what it would cost to administer the program in a

way that provides equity and protection; at any lower price, the funding from system

said his organization was unlikely to approve those costs, so GVWUA withdrew its

conservation would not be enough to cover the extra staff and engineering costs. Cullom

"They were not wanting to pay per acre what we had requested," Bergonzini said. "They

"It's not a very big amount," said GVIC Assistant Superintendent Charlie Guenther. "I did hear from a handful of ag people that they didn't want to be part of this because it sounded very technical and it was government involvement. That's something that came up." Unlike GVWUA, individual water users within GVIC did not have to apply to the program through the irrigation company, and the company's board did not take a stance

There is just one conservation project proposed in the boundaries of the Uncompangre

more than 83,000 acres of farmland in Delta and Montrose counties. The project would

Valley Water Users Association, the largest irrigation district in Western Colorado, at

enroll about 33 acres in the program and would result in about 46 acre-feet of water

on whether or not to support system conservation, according to Guenther.

deadline of Feb. 1, which was later pushed to March 1 for this summer's irrigation season. "We need to do much better when we think about how to do this in the future, if we do this in the future," he said. "We need more clarity on the data requirements, what we expect from a proposal. We need to give people more time to engage in understanding what the opportunity is and we need to start sooner. Start in the fall for an irrigation

Fallow grass hay -Fallow alfalfa Crop switching Fallow grass hay -Storage conservation cow-calf operation commodity commodity commodity Source: CWCB Credit: Laurine Lassalle - Aspen Journalism # + a b | e a u \rightarrow \bigcirc \checkmark \leftarrow

The Western Slope's two largest conservation districts — the Colorado River Water

Conservation District and Southwestern Water Conservation District — submitted

thereby securing a measure of local control. But in March, she walked back that

The UCRC has released few details so far on project proposal specifics, and publicly

applicants' personal identifying information, nearly everything else has been blacked

out: the precise location of projects; which streams and ditches are involved; details of

the water rights involved; and how much the applicants are asking to be paid for their

The districts say this makes it impossible to meaningfully review them to determine

whether the projects would cause injury to other water users. Their letters to the UCRC

say the lack of transparency raises questions about whether public funds are being used

available applications have been heavily redacted. In addition to redacting the

commitment, saying the UCRC had sole authority in the approval process.

letters to the UCRC stating their concerns with the program. Mitchell had promised the

districts that they could participate in the review and approval process for applications,

She said additional information will be available when the UCRC finalizes agreements with project participants, which should happen late this month, according to Cullom. The 39,000 acre-feet of water across the four upper-basin states will do little to boost Lake Powell. It's the proverbial drop in the bucket. But the political value of 39,000 acre-feet may be far greater than any benefit to the nation's second-largest reservoir. the system from crashing, but that part is small compared with the cuts they say are

"It's unlikely any system conservation stood up in the upper basin is going to move the

demonstrating in this process is that we do have tools, we do have resources. They are

Aspen Journalism is a nonprofit, investigative news organization covering water, the

needle," Cullom said. "But it's important for the upper basin to participate and

narrow in scope and small in volume."

environment and social justice.

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part this time around.

Grand Valley Water Users Association not participating

Although some water users in the Grand Valley Water Users Association participated in

conserved 47,000 acre-feet of water at a cost of about \$8.6 million, they won't be taking

the original system conservation pilot program, which ran from 2015 to 2018 and

The Grand Valley Irrigation Company, which serves about 40,000 acres of farmland between Palisade and Mack, has four projects proposed within its service area, covering a total of 120 acres and 285 acre-feet of water savings.

UVWUA manager Steve Pope said the system conservation program didn't get much interest from his water users because of the timing. Bergonzini agreed. "They didn't want to do a last-minute thing," Pope said. "By the time this thing was rolled out, these guys had already made their decisions and they were already committed for the next season."

Cullom has acknowledged that there were shortcomings with the program's rollout. The

UCRC unveiled details of the program in December, with an original application

Total CCU (conserved consumptive use in acre-feet) 800 600 400

"In short, SWCD is very disappointed and concerned about the process that has been undertaken by the UCRC and the state of Colorado," reads the letter from Southwestern General manager Steve Wolff. In response, Amy Ostdiek, CWCB section chief for interstate, federal and water information, said that the review process respected project proponents' privacy and that striking a balance between transparency and privacy is an ongoing effort. "The Colorado State Engineer's Office has been directly involved as implementation agreements and verification plans are developed to ensure no injury results from SCPP participation," Ostdiek said in an email. The effort shows that upper-basin water managers are willing to do their part to prevent needed in the lower basin.

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