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Big dam proposal is seeking supporters

By DENNIS WEBB

Backers of a proposed reservoir up to 130,000 acre-feet in size in Rio Blanco County are beginning to look for support, financial and otherwise, as they plan to start pursuing permits for the project.

The Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District wants to build the reservoir northeast of Rangely on Wolf Creek, a tributary of the White River on the Moffat County border, and pump water from the White River to fill it.

The district is looking at two options, one with a working pool of 20,000 acre-feet, the second with a working pool of 90,000 acre-feet, at estimated costs of \$119 million and \$191 million respectively.

The district envisions the reservoir meeting a variety of uses, including providing water to the town of Rangely, supporting oil and gas and oil shale development, providing water for endangered fish, and serving as a recreational attraction. In terms of total size, it is considering a reservoir holding 41,000 or 130,000 acre-feet of water. That would account for an additional nonworking pool that would continue to serve recreation needs at times of low water, provide an insurance water supply in circumstances such as during work on the pumping system, and make room for accumulation of silt.

The problem of sedimentation has beset Kenney Reservoir, which sits upstream of Rangely on the White River. That is threatening its viability as a continued source of water for Rangely and as a recreational amenity.

Dredging the reservoir would cost an estimated \$700 million. Siltation is expected to be less of a problem in the case of a Wolf Creek reservoir because it's off the main White River channel and the water would be pumped into it.

Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District officials discussed their proposal in Glenwood Springs last week with the board of the Colorado River District, a taxpayer-funded entity consisting of 15 counties. The Rio Blanco district is hoping the river district will contribute \$50,000 toward the cost

of seeking permits for the project, which would be built largely on federal Bureau of Land Management land. It's also seeking technical and other support from the river district.

The district board plans to consider the request and act on it at a future board meeting. But Tom Gray, the Moffat County representative on the river district board, voiced general support for the reservoir proposal.

"I think we should be on board as much as we can," he told fellow river district board members.

Representatives of the Rio Blanco district pointed to dry years such as this one, and concerns about longer-term drought, in arguing on behalf of building new storage in the White River basin.

"It really needs to happen, folks. This is critical," district board member Peggy Rector told the river district board.

The district plans to pursue funding from potential users and other sources such as the federal and state governments to pay for the project.

Meanwhile, it can expect to be challenged by some environmentalists, judging by comments that Gary Wockner of the group Save the Colorado emailed to journalists in September.

"The opposition to such a project would be fierce, uniting river protectors and fossil fuel fighters in the Western U.S. Further draining the Colorado River system to fuel and subsidize more fracked gas and fracked oil, as well as oil shale production, couldn't possibly be more wrong," he wrote.

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