

# Colorado water agencies going different ways on White River dam project

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A view of the White River foreground, and the Wolf Creek gulch, across the river. The Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District has been using state funds, and their own, to study two dam options for this area between Meeker and Rangely on the White River.

Blanco lacks evidence for its claims for municipal, irrigation, energy and environmental uses.

On Nov. 14, the CWCB directors approved the most recent grant application from Rio Blanco for \$350,000 to keep studying the proposed White River dam and reservoir project near Rangely.

But while the CWCB is spending more state money to help prepare the White River project for federal approval, another state agency, the Division of Water Resources, is asking hard questions about the project in water court.

"There are concerns whether the district can show that it can and will put the requested water rights to beneficial use within a reasonable period of time and that the requested water rights are not speculative," wrote Erin Light, the division engineer in Division 6, who oversees the White and Yampa river basins, and Tracy Kosloff, the assistant state engineer in Denver, in a report filed in water court Oct. 4.

In addition to pursuing a series of grants from CWCB, Rio Blanco applied in

The Colorado Water Conservation Board has given \$750,638 to the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District since 2013 to study a potential dam on the White River, yet officials at the Colorado Division of Water Resources say the project appears "speculative" and Rio

water court in 2014 for a new water right to store 90,000 acre-feet of water from the White River.

The two engineers in the Division of Water Resources filed their report after consulting with the state attorney general's office. Review of water rights applications by division engineers is routine, but the report filed by the division engineer and assistant state engineer raised a higher level of concerns than normal.

Also known as the Wolf Creek project, **Recommended Stories For You** it could store anywhere from 44,000 to 2.92 million acre-feet of water, according to the array of proposals, presentations and applications that have been made public over the project's ongoing evolution.

The water would be stored either in a reservoir formed by a dam across the main stem of the White River, or in an off-channel reservoir at the bottom of the Wolf Creek gulch.

The latest grant from the CWCB to Rio Blanco was to "finalize the preferred reservoir size and firm-up financial commitments of key project partners so that applications for federal permits can be filed," according to a CWCB staff memo on the grant.

Asked about the apparent conflict between CWCB and DWR on the White River project, CWCB Director Becky Mitchell said she was aware of the concerns voiced by the division and state engineers and was confident that the next phase of study supported by CWCB would help answer some of the questions raised.

"All of the grants given to Rio Blanco thus far have been all about feasibility, so we are not necessarily in disagreement with DWR, but it needs to be tried up," Mitchell said Tuesday. "There may be concerns with what DWR is stating and the grant will help us evaluate those concerns."

In another sign of CWCB's support for the potential project, the agency's finance section has added a potential \$100 million loan to the Rio Blanco district to a list of potential loans it compiles.

Brad McCloud of EIS Solutions in Grand Junction is serving as Rio Blanco's project manager for the White River project.

When asked Tuesday about the contradictory messages sent by the two state agencies, McCloud said, "I think one side is working on one end and the other is doing the other and it's a good check and balance and the way the system is supposed to work. And there are probably things that will get worked out along the way."

## **STATE QUESTIONS**

In their report filed in water court, the state's water engineers challenge Rio Blanco oft-stated claim it is seeking the new storage facility at Wolf Creek in order to meet the future water needs of the Town of Rangely, which today takes its water directly from the White River.

"The engineers have not received sufficient evidence to support the district's claimed water demands for Rangely nor evidence that Rangely intends to rely on water storage in one of the Wolf Creek Reservoirs to meet its demand," the report from Kosloff and Light says.

The engineers' report also questions the demand for water in the potential new reservoir from the energy sector.

They said Rio Blanco should, at a minimum, show how much of the 45,800 acre-feet of industrial demand it is claiming is located within the district's boundaries.

They also say Rio Blanco should make public how much of the demand from the energy sector within the district's boundaries can be satisfied by the existing water rights of the district.

In addition to challenging Rio Blanco's claims for municipal and industrial use of water in their 2018 report, Light and Kosloff also question Rio Blanco's claims for irrigation and environmental uses.

They said a storage report prepared for the project "notes that irrigated acreage and irrigation water demand is projected to decrease in the future" in the area downstream of the reservoir.

And the engineers said they "do not believe that a water right for irrigation use should be awarded in this case."

And the engineers question Rio Blanco claim that it will release up to 42,000 acre-feet of water from its proposed reservoir to the benefit of endangered fish downstream on the White and Green rivers.

They say an ongoing study has yet to make clear how much water is needed for the endangered fish and that "until these numbers are known, claiming any quantity of water for these uses is speculative."

## **SIZE IN FLUX**

The White River project has a wide range of potential uses, according to Rio Blanco, and it also has a wide range of potential sizes, as various presentations and applications have included potential sizes from 44,000 acre-feet to 90,000 acre-feet to 400,000 acre-feet to 2.92 million acre-feet.

Alden Vanden Brink, the manager of the Rio Blanco district, told the CWCB directors Nov. 14 that his district is not seeking to build a 400,000 acre-foot reservoir, despite the reference in Rio Blanco's grant application to study a reservoir of that size.

"The 400,000 is maximum size," Vanden Brink said. "That is not what the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District is looking to build. It's going to take somebody from a way outside source to come to the table for that."

Vanden Brink said the district was seeking to store "anywhere from 44,000 to about 130,000" acre-feet of water.

However, a memo on the grant application from CWCB staff noted that a 400,000 acre-foot reservoir might have some benefit to the state.

"If the higher end of the storage is implemented, the project has tremendous potential to help the majority of the state of Colorado address Colorado River Compact administration issues," the staff memo said.

An earlier study on the dam by W.W. Wheeler and Associates for the Rio Blanco district found it was possible to build a dam on the White River at Wolf Creek that would hold 2.92 million acre-feet of water.

The latest grant application to CWCB from the Rio Blanco district says "the preferred reservoir size will be developed based on the amount of water needed and committed to by key project stakeholders."

Wade Cox, the president of the Rio Blanco Water Conservancy District, discussed the project in October with the board of the Colorado River District, and referenced the varying potential sizes of the reservoir.

"There is never going to be enough water," Cox said. "I don't care how big you build it. Whatever you do, it's never going to be enough. Somebody somewhere is going to utilize it."

*Editor's note: Aspen Journalism covers water and rivers in collaboration with The Aspen Times and other Swift Communications newspapers. More at <http://www.aspenjournalism.org>.*