
Getches-Wilkinson Center Research Publications

Colorado's Water Plan

Anne Castle

Getches-Wilkinson Center for Natural Resources, Energy, and the Environment
University of Colorado

Colorado's Water Plan (CWP) recognizes that multiple, incremental efforts, involving many different sectors within the state, will be necessary to address our projected water needs in a manner consistent with the values articulated in CWP. In several of the proposed action areas, CWP suggests the need for further research and advancement of the options available. The Getches-Wilkinson Center for Natural Resources, Energy and the Environment at the University of Colorado (GWC), with funding support from a generous individual donor, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Gates Family Foundation, has taken up this challenge.

The work to date has focused on (1) Alternative Transfer Methods (ATMs) for sharing water in times of need without a permanent severance from agricultural land, (2) integration of land use and water planning, and (3) promotion of healthy rivers through stream management and watershed planning. In each of these areas, the GWC team has taken an in-depth look at the existing situation, often using case studies, identified critical issues and opportunities, and provided a set of recommendations for concrete action. White papers describing this work and conclusions are available at <http://www.colorado.edu/law/research/gwc>

The universe of ATMs in Colorado is large, but the volume of agricultural water being shared through these mechanisms is far less than the measurable objective in CWP of 50,000 acre feet. In addition to the financing and infrastructure required to scale up the implementation of ATMs, new legal structures may also be necessary. The GWC team has recommended modifications to Colorado's existing statewide water bank structure to adapt it in a practical way to the needs of farmers and municipal and industrial users.

Better integration of the land use approval process with water supply and sustainability considerations has been consistently recognized in the Basin Implementation Plans and in CWP as essential to meeting the projected gap between supply and demand. Strong support exists for incorporating water saving practices into local land use planning. GWC's research in this area reveals some surprising disconnects between the requirements applicable to cities and counties in connection with determining that adequate water supplies exist for proposed new development. And while water conservation may be addressed at the local government level, the land use approval processes rarely consider the water-use efficiency of proposed new development. The CWP measurable objective of having the majority of Coloradans live in communities with water saving actions incorporated into land use planning may

require more statewide guidance and direction, some of which is already occurring in the new training programs offered by the Colorado Water Conservation Board and Pace University.

Multiple groups around the state are focused on creating and implementing stream management plans and watershed plans, and the state funding made available for this purpose will accelerate this work. GWC has documented many successful projects that provide benefit to both water rights owners and streamflows, and catalogued the funding sources available to support these efforts. The GWC team is now helping to strengthen existing efforts and build a coordinated and sustainable program in Colorado for improving stream health.

Turning Colorado's Water Plan into meaningful action cannot be accomplished in a day and is not the sole responsibility of the Colorado Water Conservation Board. Many different segments of the water community need to help shoulder the load. GWC is pleased to provide support for this critical process.

About the author: Anne Castle is a Senior Fellow at the Getches-Wilkinson Center for Natural Resources, Energy and the Environment at the University of Colorado. From 2009 to 2014, she was the Assistant Secretary for Water and Science at the U.S. Department of the Interior. Prior to her federal service, Castle practiced water law with the firm of Holland & Hart for over 25 years.