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Colorado Water Conservation Board to Release Ruedi Reservoir Water for Endangered Fish

The Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) today initiated the release of water from Ruedi Reservoir for the month of September for the benefit of the Colorado River endangered fish.

On August 31, the CWCB entered into a lease agreement with the Ute Water Conservancy District (UWCD) for water stored in Ruedi Reservoir, located on the Fryingpan River near Basalt, to supplement flows for existing instream flow water rights on the Colorado River. The CWCB approved entering into the Water Lease Agreement with the UWCD during a regular CWCB Board meeting in May 2015. This agreement allows the CWCB to lease between 6,000 acre-feet and 12,000 acre-feet of water from Ruedi Reservoir for instream flow use on the 15-Mile Reach of the Colorado River, located near Palisade, Colorado. No releases will result in overall flows from Ruedi exceeding 300 cfs.

The so-called 15-Mile Reach provides critical spawning habitat for the following endangered fish: Colorado pikeminnow, razorback sucker, humpback chub, and bonytail. It was determined that the water would be best utilized to preserve the natural environment at rates up to and exceeding the current instream flow rights to meet U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) flow targets for the four endangered fish species in the reach. "These types of 'win-win' agreements are needed to assure that Colorado can beneficially use water within Colorado and help recover endangered fish that use the Colorado River for habitat," said James Eklund, the Director of the CWCB.

The UWCD was established in 1965 for the purpose of supplying domestic water service to the rural areas of the Grand Valley, encompassing roughly 260 square miles and servicing over 80,000 people. The UWCD originally entered into a Repayment Contract with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in September 2013, through which it purchased 12,000 acre-feet of water annually from Ruedi Reservoir. By entering into this lease, the CWCB has access to this water on a short-term basis for the benefit of four endangered fish species. Water released from Ruedi Reservoir under this lease will also be available for non-consumptive power generation immediately above the reach, providing additional late summer benefits to the local area.

“This is the first time that the Species Conservation Trust Fund has been used to purchase stored water to supplement flows to critical habitat for endangered fish. We are excited that we have been able to use this particular funding source and our instream flow program for this purpose,” said Linda Bassi, Chief of the Stream and Lake Protection Section of the CWCB. Currently, the CWCB holds two instream flow water rights on the reach. Jana Mohrman, Hydrologist for the USFWS for the Upper Colorado River Recovery Program, added that “it’s outstanding to see the initiative and cooperation on behalf of the endangered fish by Ute Water and CWCB.”

“Colorado has always been on the leading edge of balancing the development of water resources with recovery of endangered species, and this lease is another example of how Colorado has been able to creatively balance those competing interests,” said Ted Kowalski, Chief of the Interstate, Federal & Water Information Section,

The CWCB has already coordinated with a variety of stakeholders within the affected reaches to implement the releases of this water from Ruedi Reservoir. This coordination will continue throughout the month of September.

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