

Agricultural/Urban/Environmental Water Sharing: Innovative Strategies for the Colorado River Basin and the West

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, agricultural water is being considered the likely source of water to meet unmet urban and environmental demands. Are there strategies for water sharing between sectors which meet multiple purposes while avoiding unilateral transfer of water from agriculture? This session will describe the results of an initiative funded by the Walton Family Foundation in 2010 to explore that question. The Family Farm Alliance, Western Urban Water Coalition, The Nature Conservancy, and others convened a workshop of western water leaders from all three sectors to develop recommendations for the Western Governors' Association. Those recommendations, and a dozen strategies being employed around the West will be discussed. The Colorado Water Institute (CWI) at Colorado State University facilitated the workshop and the report. CWI policy and collaboration specialist, MaryLou Smith, will present this session.

KEY WORDS

Water sharing, agricultural water transfers, water shortages. Cooperative water sharing strategies.

SECURE WATER FOR AGRICULTURE BY SHARING?

Across the west, the writing is on the wall: we do not have enough water for projected population growth and to keep our rivers whole. More and more, farms are being purchased and dried up so that water can be transferred for other uses, mostly urban. Nicknamed “buy and dry”, almost no one thinks it is a good idea.

The target is on agriculture when it comes to looking for water to reallocate. But we count on the food and fiber, the rural communities, the wildlife habitat, and the open space agriculture gives us. Are there creative ways we can share water for agricultural, urban, and environmental purposes, without relying on unilateral transfers of water from agriculture?

WATER LEADERS TACKLE THE ISSUE

In the summer of 2010, a group of agricultural, urban and environmental water leaders retreated to a ranch in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado to look at water sharing strategies across the west that are working and consider how to remove obstacles that keep such strategies from being employed more widely. They believe if we set aside differences in how we have traditionally viewed things, we can figure out ways to share water without harming agriculture or rivers—and without pulling the rug out from under private property rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The convened leaders, from perspectives as diverse as the Family Farm Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, the Western Urban Water Coalition and two dozen others, came to consensus on a set of recommendations—action steps for governors and policy makers. Their recommendations, along with creative water sharing strategies being employed across the West, are contained in the report “*Agricultural/Urban/Environmental Water Sharing: Innovative Strategies for the Colorado River Basin and the West*” available at www.cwi.colostate.edu/watersharing.

Basically, these leaders agreed we need to:

- Look at things whole instead of as separate jurisdictional pieces to find ways to share infrastructure, utilize advanced technology and manage more flexibly.
- Go beyond lip service to meaningfully engage all affected stakeholder groups, all the time, from the beginning, not after proposals are already developed.
- Work toward a regulatory process that’s better integrated, with less redundant action by multiple agencies, that aims to facilitate sustainable solutions that meet multiple needs.
- Identify incentives for market driven solutions.
- Identify laws and institutions that might be modified to provide more flexibility and effectively promote water sharing, while respecting and preserving water rights.
- Find ways to reduce high transaction costs that discourage temporary transfers.
- Encourage western governors and other policy makers to address the overarching obstacles that stand in the way of creative water sharing strategies.

WATER SHARING STRATEGIES

This project included interviewing 50 individuals across the West who are actively employing or investigating creative water sharing strategies, to determine from their experiences what works, what doesn’t work, and what are the challenges that stand in the way. Eleven of those strategies are detailed in the report. A sampling of the strategies includes:

- Farmers and cities in Arizona trading use of surface water and groundwater to mutual advantage
- Ranchers in Oregon paid by environmentalists to forego a third cutting of hay to leave water in the stream for late summer fish flows;

- A ditch company in New Mexico willing to sell shares of water to New Mexico Audubon for bird habitat on the same terms offered to farmers who grow cotton or pecans;
- A California flood control and water supply project creatively managed to meet multiple goals of restoring groundwater, maintaining instream flows for wild salmon and steelhead, and providing water for cities and farms;
- Seven ditch companies cooperating in Colorado in a “Super Ditch” scheme to pool part of their water through rotational fallowing, for lease to cities, while maintaining agricultural ownership of the water rights.

“While these strategies sound like good common sense, they all faced sizable obstacles,” says Reagan Waskom, director of the Colorado Water Institute. “If we want to share water for the benefit of all, we need a lot more flexibility.” The group’s recommendations were developed to provide that flexibility, Waskom said.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Western States Water Council, the water policy arm of the Western Governors’ Association received the group’s report in the spring of 2011. They have formed a committee to consider ways these strategies might be adapted and adopted throughout the West.

The Walton Family Foundation that funded the 2010 initiative recently funded two field trips to the Pacific Northwest so that agricultural and environmental stakeholders from the Colorado River Basin in Arizona and Colorado could learn about unique water sharing strategies being employed there. Water leaders from both the environmental and agricultural sectors had the opportunity to spend a week together touring various projects in the Deschutes Basin, in the Yakima Basin, and on the John Day River in Oregon. In addition to hearing about how Oregon stakeholders overcame obstacles to achieve water sharing, the Colorado and Arizona stakeholders benefitted from the relationship building afforded from the trips.

Colorado State University has recently been awarded a planning grant from the USDA to explore further how agricultural water security can be strengthened by relieving water shortage pressures on other sectors through cooperative management agreements.