



Press Release

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Ag water efficiency, water quality are goals of \$8 million federal grant for Lower Gunnison Basin

The Lower Gunnison River Basin, including the North Fork River Valley, is the target for \$8 million in new grant funding that was announced on Wednesday, Jan. 14, 2015, by Tom Vilsack, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, to improve irrigation practices, water quality, agricultural productivity and environmental conditions.

The Colorado River District is the lead partner in the grant-funded project that includes a total of 31 partnering entities. Dave Kanzer, Senior Water Resources Engineer for the Colorado River District, said the grant stems from the 2015 Farm Bill initiative called the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) that identified the Colorado River system as a "Critical Conservation Area," one of eight in the country. The \$8 million grant will be combined with other local, state and federal funding, which all together should approach a total of \$50 million worth of improvements in the Lower Gunnison Basin.

"Agricultural water use efficiency and associated water quality improvements; those are the bottom lines of this project," Kanzer said. "In general, these dollars will be invested to line and pipe open canal systems and to convert flood irrigation practices to high efficiency pressurized systems such as sprinklers, micro spray and drip systems, as appropriate."

This newly approved project is officially titled "*Modernizing Agricultural Water Management in the Lower Gunnison River Basin: A Cooperative Approach to Increased Water Use Efficiency and Water Quality Improvements.*" It will be accomplished in four specific irrigation service areas: the Bostwick Park Water Conservancy District, southeast of Montrose; the Crawford Water Conservancy District near Crawford, the North Fork Water Conservancy District near Paonia and Hotchkiss; and in the Uncompahgre Valley Water Users Association area, located primarily between Montrose and Delta.

"This grant is a big 'win-win-win' for agricultural, economic and environmental sustainability," Kanzer said. "It will really help our agricultural producers implement new conservation practices that not only produce more 'crop per drop' of water but significantly reduces their environmental footprint."

"This project harnesses local innovation occurring within the agricultural and water communities and integrates activities to accelerate a common mission of utilizing water resources wisely while ensuring agricultural and endangered species sustainability", Kanzer continued.

Although similar activities, such as canal piping and sprinkler installments, have been occurring in the Lower Gunnison River sub-basin, they have been primarily limited, disparate efforts without a unifying “grand design” and without leadership from local producers.

In recent years, a new ad-hoc group of agricultural producers, self-titled “No Chico Brush,” came together to advocate for this “grand design” approach that integrates previously unrelated water use improvement activities.

“No Chico Brush brought together a diversity of partners under a coordinated leadership team to try to achieve greater water efficiency results and to provide multiple environmental benefits,” Kanzer explained.

For example, the project will help reduce high levels of salt and selenium in the Gunnison and Colorado Rivers. Selenium is a naturally occurring chemical thought to adversely impact sensitive fish. Both salt and selenium can result as an unintended consequences of inefficient agricultural water use practices in Lower Gunnison Basin. The grant funded project will also benefit the river system in places by reducing water loss and increased flows.

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