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Agency protests pipeline project

By DENNIS WEBB

Utah's state water resource agency is among numerous organizations protesting a proposal to pipe water from the Green River south of Flaming Gorge Reservoir to Colorado's Front Range.

The Utah Board of Water Resources and Division of Water Resources say in their protest letter that the proposal is "very unusual," and that it "requests a huge amount of water" — 76 cubic-feet per second or 55,000 acre-feet a year — "from Utah's precious water resources, for some unknown use in Colorado."

They say the water right application, "if granted, would allow Colorado to benefit from the development, economic opportunities, and public well-being benefits that accrue from water resources at Utah's expense."

Aaron Million, the Fort Collins man who filed the application through the company Water Horse Resources LLC, said the protest from the water board is standard, to provide standing in the water right case if any major concerns arise for the protesters in the future.

"We fully expected it. It's a non-issue for us," he said.

The Utah water resources board is appointed by Utah's governor to develop and conserve the state's water. The decision on Million's water right proposal will be made by Utah's state engineer, who heads the state's Division of Water Rights.

Million is proposing piping the water east in Wyoming and then south into Colorado.

He previously proposed a project involving about five times as much water, which would have come out of Flaming Gorge Reservoir and been piped to the Front Range. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission denied a preliminary permit application for that project in 2012. That proposal had a hydropower component to it, as does the current one.

The earlier proposal faced widespread opposition from conservation groups and entities including the city of Grand Junction, Mesa County and western Colorado's Colorado River District.

The river district filed a protest against Million's new proposal. So did the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, several conservation groups, and several local water conservancy districts and water users associations in Utah.

The Utah water resources board and division say in their letter that the current application "will have huge impacts in Utah," affecting water supply and quality in the state even as its population is growing and its water needs are increasing, and impacting public recreation and the stream environment along the Green River.

They question the physical and economic feasibility of piping the water "over or around the Rocky Mountains" for use on the Front Range, and say the application was filed for speculative purposes.

"Nothing in the vague application outlines actual beneficial uses in Colorado. No contracts or other types of agreements are provided demonstrating that Colorado can beneficially use the water, or for what beneficial uses it would be employed," the letter says.

Million says he had subscribed interest for 400,000 acre-feet of water for the previous project, and demand for water has gone up since then.

He estimates that the project could cost up to \$1 billion, down from an estimated \$2.8 billion for the previous one, and says a tripling in the cost of water on the Front Range helps make the project economic.

The Utah water resource officials, in their letter, also question what authorizations the project has from the state of Colorado to ensure the diversion would count against Colorado's allocation under an interstate compact divvying up water among states in the Upper Colorado River Basin.

Gary Wockner, director of the group Save the Colorado, which also is protesting Million's proposal, said it's significant that "Utah is telling Aaron Million he can't have Utah's water and take it to Colorado."

He questions why Million would think Utah would give its water to Colorado.

"I don't know that there's any legal basis for that," Wockner said.

Million said other similar projects already exist in the Upper Colorado River Basin, and he noted that Utah is pursuing a project that would involve diverting water out of the Arizona portion of Lake Powell and piping it into Utah.