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Agricultural Water Use

Colorado River Water Conservation District Policy Statements:

Agriculture is a critical component of Western Colorado's economy, environment, and community. The River District supports and promotes Western Colorado agriculture and will partner with agricultural interests to ensure a vibrant agricultural sector in Western Colorado. Moreover, the River District recognizes the considerable value of Western Colorado's agricultural water rights, especially those senior to the Colorado River Compact, and will work to protect and maintain agricultural rights on the West Slope and in local ownership.

Accordingly, the River District:

- **Supports federal and state legislation directed at increasing overall economic viability for producers of food and fiber,**
- **Supports legislative and administrative actions protecting pre-Colorado River Compact water rights,**
- **Will pro-actively pursue avoidance of Colorado River compact administration in order to avoid disproportionate impacts to West Slope agriculture,**
- **Encourages innovation that adds value for producers and enhances productivity,**
- **Supports land use policies and programs protective of agricultural lands, water rights, and property values,**
- **Supports voluntary, cooperative relationships between fish and wildlife agencies and agriculture to realize mutual benefits,**
- **Supports land and water use decisions that support or enhance West Slope agricultural productivity,**
- **Will seek alternatives to involuntary transfer or use of Western Colorado-based water rights to meet any municipal demands outside of the West Slope, and**
- **Will evaluate and consult, as requested, on water efficiency projects and programs to determine potential return flow consequences.**

Background & Discussion:

Statewide, agriculture is the majority user of Colorado's water, much of it with senior water rights. For this, Colorado enjoys affordable food and fiber - much of it locally sourced - abundant open space, environmental and recreational river flows, and important employment and other economic benefits.

Agricultural water rights, primarily in Eastern Colorado, have become a primary source of new water supplies for growing Front Range municipalities. While most of the buy-and-dry (and conversion from ag to municipal use) has been on the East Slope to date, the purchase and conversion of West Slope farm and ranch land and associated water rights for municipal uses is real and must be addressed.

Certain efficiency and conservation measures have unintended consequences, such as reductions in delayed return flows, impacting stream conditions during naturally low flow periods. Other measures may have multiple consequences, some not intuitively obvious or intended, all of which should be considered.

Colorado has historically, and is currently, experiencing periods of severe, sustained droughts. The River District, in cooperation with producers and other interests, is exploring voluntary, compensated mechanisms for the temporary use of senior agricultural water rights to meet critical water supply needs to prevent or to mitigate the impacts of compact administration under the 1922 and 1948 Colorado River compacts. The River District believes that these pro-active explorations are critical to the long-term protection and sustainability of agriculture and agricultural water rights in Western Colorado. Without some alternative mechanism, we foresee municipalities and water speculators pursuing buy-and-dry strategies on the West Slope to protect or mitigate against the consequences of Compact curtailment. Moreover, it must be remembered that municipalities in Colorado have the powers of eminent domain.