



# May 2020 NEWSLETTER

## IN THIS ISSUE:

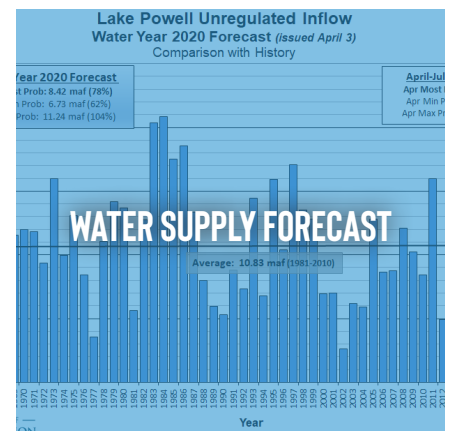
**RIVER DISTRICT TAKING STATE  
OF THE RIVER EVENTS ONLINE**

**DISTRICT BOARD STILL  
MULLING MILL LEVY  
BALLOT QUESTION**

**UPDATES FROM  
THE GENERAL MANAGER**

**COLORADO RIVER DISTRICT  
BOARD MEETS OVER ZOOM**

**WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE  
PARADOX VALLEY SALINITY  
CONTROL UNIT?**



# RIVER DISTRICT TAKING STATE OF THE RIVER EVENTS ONLINE



**A**s the snow melts, reservoirs clear of ice and ditches and rivers swell with runoff, Colorado River District staff normally look forward to our State of the River meetings, which provide local updates on important water issues in throughout the District.

Few events have gone as planned this spring. In light of COVID-19, the District will hold some State of the River events virtually as webinars. Presentations will include the same information the West Slope has come to expect: updates on runoff and hydrology, the latest on local water issues and information about how our water fits into the larger Colorado River basin.

We've got two virtual State of the River events planned so far.

The Summit State of the River will be 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Thursday, May 14 on Zoom. You can complete the required registration for the event and find an agenda here: [bit.ly/SummitSOR](https://bit.ly/SummitSOR). This event is hosted by the Colorado River District and the Blue River Watershed Group. A recording of the webinar will be emailed to registrants after the event.

The Mesa State of the River webinar will be 6 p.m. Wednesday, May 20. You can complete the required registration for the event and find an agenda here: [bit.ly/MesaSOR](https://bit.ly/MesaSOR). This event is hosted by the Colorado River District and the Ruth Powell Hutchins Water Center at Colorado Mesa University. A recording of the webinar will be emailed to registrants after the event.

The Colorado River District will hold a public forum to provide important updates on the River District, West Slope water and big river issues featuring Colorado River District Manager Andy Mueller and Colorado State Climatologist Russ Schumacher. The event will be noon Wednesday, June 10. More information about the event will be available soon at [www.ColoradoRiverDistrict.org](https://www.ColoradoRiverDistrict.org).



# DISTRICT BOARD STILL MULLING MILL LEVY BALLOT QUESTION

**A**s West Slope water faces increasing pressure from growing population and decreasing flows attributable to climate change, the Colorado River District's Board of Directors is considering asking voters to allow the District to increase its mill levy from 0.252 mills to 0.5 mills.

The median homeowner in the District would pay an additional \$7.03 annually in property taxes to the District under the proposed measure.

At its April 2020 quarterly meeting, the Board again considered the possible ballot measure amid impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and additional information gathered since Directors last discussed the possible mill levy increase in January.

The Board did not decide whether it will place the issue on the ballot. Directors will likely take up that question in a meeting later this summer.

During the meeting, General Manager Andy Mueller recommended that the Board postpone any decision on the measure until the economic toll of the coronavirus pandemic became clearer.

"It is clear that the community members and taxpayers in our District are suffering an unprecedented economically devastating event which has shuttered thousands of businesses and put many thousands more out of work," Mueller wrote in a memo to the Board. "The extent and duration of the economic devastation is far from clear at this point in time making any decision regarding a ballot question difficult at best."

## WHY ASK FOR A TAX INCREASE?

Western Colorado faces an uncertain water future and the Colorado River District faces an uncertain financial future. The District's revenues are forecast to decline due to several factors. This threatens the District's ability to successfully continue the fight to keep West Slope water on the West Slope, continue to ensure adequate water supplies for West Slope farmers and ranchers, continue to ensure sustainable drinking water supplies for West Slope communities and to continue to protect fish, wildlife and recreation by maintaining river levels and water quality. Revenue from the possible mill levy increase would largely be used to support water projects on the West Slope benefiting, productive agriculture, rehabilitation of aging infrastructure, healthy rivers, watershed health and water quality projects and water conservation and efficiency.

## The projected financial decline stems from three key issues:

- Declining tax revenue from the energy industry. The coal, oil and natural gas industries have historically generated almost 25% of the District's tax revenue. That percentage has decreased to 11% in about six years as West Slope oil, gas and coal production has decreased.
- Revenue ratcheting down due to TABOR, Colorado's Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR) in the state

COLORADO RIVER DISTRICT  
PROTECTING  
WEST SLOPE  
WATER  
SINCE 1937



# DISTRICT BOARD STILL MULLING MILL LEVY BALLOT QUESTION CONT.

constitution. TABOR limits the amount of revenue the Colorado River District and other local governments can collect and spend. No matter how much revenue the District brings in, it is only allowed to keep and spend an amount equivalent to the previous year's inflation plus the area's population growth. This means that since TABOR was enacted, the River District's mill levy has fallen from 0.394 mills in the early 2000s to 0.252 mills today. Without voter approval, it can't be increased.

- The Gallagher amendment in the constitution has lowered the Residential Assessment Ratio, which disproportionately impacts rural districts such as the Colorado River District. When Gallagher was enacted, the Residential Assessment Ratio was 21%. Today, it is 7.15%. This rate is expected to continue to fall, meaning less revenue for the Colorado River District's core mission of protecting West Slope water.

The Colorado River District would use money from a larger mill levy to continue to protect West Slope water, by partnering with local communities and water users to initiate and complete priority multi-use projects and to sustain existing expertise needed to protect western Colorado water against a

myriad of threats. The money raised locally will be leveraged to bring in state, federal and private foundation funds to complete priorities set by our local communities.

Director Marc Catlin of Montrose County said many of the organizations the District is negotiating with have "a bank of lawyers that is probably larger than our complete staff."

"We need to be able to compete on a level playing field, and that's probably what our future is going to be. We are going to fight very hard to keep what we have, and to keep from becoming an augmentation source for anybody else that wants to use water in a way other than what our water rights are stated for," said Catlin, who is also a state representative in the General Assembly.

In the meeting, Mueller also presented a draft implementation plan which outlines projects new revenue might fund in five areas: productive agriculture; infrastructure; healthy rivers; watershed health and water quality; and conservation and efficiency projects.

"The term projects broadly includes healthy river programs as well as improvement of a canal or ditch or reservoir. ... A project doesn't necessarily mean going out with a D9 bulldozer and doing something," said Board President David Merritt of Garfield County.

## GATHERING PUBLIC INPUT

Before the coronavirus reached Colorado, River District staff spoke with county commissioners in five of the District's 15 counties about the possible measure. Most voiced support for the River District.

Board members also heard a presentation on polling data on the possible measure. Polling was conducted in the third week of March – after the first COVID-19 closures were put in place, but before the virus-related economic devastation was fully understood. This data, though already out of date amid the pandemic, indicated there was significant support for the possible tax increase to fund the protection of West Slope water. The Board and staff of the District expressed an understanding of the financial impact the virus is having while also giving voice to the need to protect Western Slope water security and the potential for these funds to be used as an economic stimulus attracting outside money and boosting the local economy of the West Slope.

# DEMAND MANAGEMENT INVESTIGATION CONTINUES AT THE STATE LEVEL

**D**emand management is a possible tool to conserve – or not use – Colorado River water in order that the water can be used to bolster reservoir levels in Lake Powell and protect Colorado River water users from the risk of curtailment under the Colorado River Compact of 1922.

Demand management is one of three strategies listed in the Upper Basin states' Drought Contingency Plan signed in 2019 along with the Lower Basin states and the Bureau of Reclamation. Lower Basin states signed on to a Drought Contingency Plan that calls for specific staged cuts in use as Lake Mead falls to certain levels. Because the Upper Basin is not overdrawing its compact allocations, its plan only looks at demand management as a possibility to be investigated, along with cloud seeding, invasive phreatophyte removal and changing operations of three big reservoirs: Aspinall Unit, Flaming Gorge and Navajo.

In Colorado, the Colorado Water Conservation Board has formed eight workgroups to investigate if demand management is feasible under a policy that conserved water would be created by temporary, voluntary and compensated means. The Colorado River District supports this policy and a number of staff and Board of Directors members serve on the CWCB workgroups.

General Manager Andy Mueller reported that many of the eight workgroups have met multiple times in the last eight months, and members of all eight workgroups met March 4-5 with the Interbasin Compact Committee meeting in Denver.

CWCB summary reports of the workgroups can be found at this link: <https://cwcb.colorado.gov/demand-management>.

Mueller also reported to the Board the observations of staff members and others serving on the workgroups. That report can be found here on page 72: <https://www.coloradoriverdistrict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/april-2020-second-quarterly-meeting-packet-public.pdf#page=72>.

## COLORADO RIVER RISK STUDY'S PHASE III LOOKS MORE CLOSELY AT SUB-BASIN WATER USE

**A**s part of its mission to protect West Slope water supplies, the Colorado River District, along with its partners from the Southwestern Water Conservation District and the four West Slope basin roundtables, is moving into the fifth year of the Colorado River Risk Study. The most recent effort is examining the consumptive uses in some sub-basins in Western Colorado and how that water use is split between pre- and post-Colorado River Compact of 1922 water rights in an effort to assist basin water users gain an understanding of what the impacts of a





## COLORADO RIVER RISK STUDY CONT.

potential compact “call” might be.

The District is working with sub-basins to examining potential curtailment scenarios should there be a need under Colorado River Compact of 1922.

Requesting further study are the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District, the Gunnison Basin Roundtable and the Upper Yampa Water Conservancy District.

Earlier phases of the Risk Study found that on average, Colorado depletes 2.53 million acre-feet of Colorado River water with use on both sides of the Continental Divide. Of that number, about 1.7 million acre-feet are pre-compact consumptive use and the balance is post-compact use. Pre-compact is an important delineation because the compact excludes those older water right from curtailment.

Importantly, the Colorado mainstem basin is the biggest user of Colorado River water in the state, with about 1.2 million-acre feet in depletions. About 551,000 acre-feet goes to the Front Range, and almost all of that is post-compact water. The study also breaks down pre- and post-compact consumptive use in the Yampa, White, Gunnison and Southwest basins. The full report can be read at: <https://www.coloradoriverdistrict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/phase-iii-final-report.pdf>.

## STUDY OF SECONDARY ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF POSSIBLE CURTAILMENT BEING STUDIED

**T**he Colorado River District, in its mission to protect Western Colorado water users, is at the forefront in developing science and studies related to what would happen if there were to be a reduction of Colorado River water use.

One of the District-supported efforts is the “Study of Secondary Economic Impacts Associated with a Potential Upper Basin Demand Management Program,” commissioned by the Colorado River Water Bank Work Group, of which the District together with the Southwestern Water Conservation District, Tri-State Generation and Transmission, Inc., The Nature Conservancy, the Upper Gunnison Water Conservancy District, and both the Uncompahgre and the Grand Valley Water Users Associations are members.

COVID-19 has slowed a second round of basin focus groups examining economic issues, reported Mike Eytel, senior water resource specialist for the District. Information from the focus groups will be coupled with farm and Main Street economic statistics to form a picture of what might happen if a potential demand management program resulted in less agricultural activity on the Western Slope; and how that reduction could impact local economies.

For instance, if West Slope farmers are spending less on crop inputs and equipment, what happens to the seed, feed and equipment dealers and, in turn, what happens to the overall economy? This study aims to answer this question.

A final report is expected this summer.





# UPPER COLORADO RIVER WATER CONSERVATION PLAN APPROVED

**T**he Colorado River District Board has approved a conservation plan for a pilot project that will test fallowing of high elevation forage crops in Grand County. Under legislation passed in 2013, the River District is one of the agencies that can approve a plan that ensures water users don't lose the value of their water rights by temporary non-use.

The plan enables a project called "Evaluating Conserved Consumptive Use in the Upper Colorado River" to

move forward. The project is an endeavor of the Colorado Basin Roundtable and a group of water users and landowners in western Grand County. It is supported by a \$500,000 grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board.

The plan encompasses 1,174.4 acres in total; 846.7 acres of full-season fallow and 327.7 acres of split-season fallowing, with irrigation ceasing on June 15.

According to plan documents, the overarching purpose of the project is to integrate

multiple facets of agricultural water management – including science-based estimations of crop water consumptive use, strategies for reduced consumption, economic considerations, forage yield and quality impact of reduced pasture irrigation and producer involvement and feedback.





## COLORADO RIVER DISTRICT BOARD MEETS OVER ZOOM



**T**he Colorado River District Board of Directors held its meeting entirely virtually for the first time. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, directors, staff members and the public tuned into the meeting remotely, using Zoom.

If you missed River District history in the making, you can view the meeting at any time on the [River District's Youtube channel](#).

The River District hopes to hold the July 2020 quarterly meeting in person at the District's headquarters in Glenwood Springs.

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE PARADOX VALLEY SALINITY CONTROL UNIT?

**I**n Montrose County's Paradox Valley, the Bureau of Reclamation operates a little-known facility that intercepts salty groundwater to keep it from entering the Dolores River and subsequently the Colorado River. The briny water is pumped almost 3 miles into the earth via an injection well.

Salinity control in the Colorado River Basin is extremely important to prevent economic damages associated with adverse water quality impacts to crops and drinking water supplies. Salinity control efforts across the Upper Basin reduce impacts and allow water use to continue without violating Clean Water Act standards; all actions occur via federal statute and through cooperative agreement amongst Basin States, Reclamation and regulators.

According to Reclamation, the Paradox Valley Unit (PVU) is nearing the end of its useful life. Because of this, Reclamation is studying alternatives to potentially replace this salinity control facility. The public comment period for the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) has ended and Reclamation is preparing to release a draft final EIS that will identify a preferred alternative.

The Colorado River District is a cooperating agency in the EIS process and is working closely with the Salinity Control

Forum, the State of Colorado, Southwestern Water Conservation District and River District constituents to help ensure that all concerns are identified and addressed.

Four alternatives have been identified in the draft EIS: A – the No Action Alternative, meaning no changes to the existing PVU; B – construction of a new injection well; C – construction of evaporation ponds; and D – implementation of zero liquid discharge (enhanced evaporation) technology. An important issue with the existing PVU are the earthquakes that have been associated with its operation. The unit has been shut down periodically due to concerns caused by seismic activity,



# WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE PARADOX VALLEY SALINITY CONTROL UNIT? CONT.

however, Reclamation recently restarted the PVU at 40% of capacity, as part of a 6-month evaluation period, unrelated to the EIS process.

Salinity control in the Colorado River Basin is extremely important to prevent economic damages associated with adverse water quality impacts to crops and drinking water supplies. Salinity control efforts across the Upper Basin reduce impacts and allow water use to continue without violating Clean Water Act standards; all actions occur via federal statute and through cooperative agreement amongst Basin States, Reclamation and regulators.

According to Reclamation: "The Paradox Valley Unit extracts naturally occurring brine groundwater in the Paradox Valley, thereby preventing it from entering the Dolores River. Saline concentrations of this natural brine groundwater have been measured in excess of 250,000 milligrams per liter, which, prior to the PVU, added more than 205,000 tons of salt to the Dolores River annually. The Dolores River is a major tributary to the Colorado River. The PVU is designed to prevent the natural salt load from degrading the water quality of the main stem of the Colorado River."



To learn more, go to <https://www.usbr.gov/uc/progact/paradox/index.html>.



The fall-off of precipitation from late March through early May is degrading the April-July runoff forecast for Lake Powell to 65% of average, a 15-point decline since April 1. That figure might surprise people in the Yampa-White and Upper Colorado River basins, where snowpack peaked at average or a little above and streamflows are forecast to be close to normal.

But as water users on both the north and south side of the Grand Mesa know, this past winter was not so kind for building snowpack, and thus water supply. The Gunnison Basin and southwestern Colorado also saw snowpack fall off. Those basins started slowly and reached close to normal in early March. Generally, the wintertime storm tracks favored northwestern Colorado.

The Colorado Basin River Forecast Center issued this report on May 4: “The weather pattern during April was dominated by general ridging across the Intermountain West. April precipitation was generally below to much below average across the Colorado River Basin and Great Basin of Utah. It was exceptionally dry over northern Utah and southwest Colorado. A number of SNOTEL sites across Utah and southwest Colorado recorded their driest April precipitation on record, with many of the sites having a period of record of at least 35 years. Southwest Colorado observed April unregulated flows were near record low in a few areas within the Gunnison, Dolores and San Juan basins.”

The Center also reported that the highest forecast volumes

with respect to average are in the White/Yampa, Virgin, parts of the Upper Green and the Upper Colorado River mainstem above Kremmling, where volume forecasts are generally near the 1981-2010 historical average.

According to the center, precipitation in April upstream of Grand Junction was 75% of average. In the Gunnison Basin, it was 50%. Above Lake Powell, cumulatively, it was 60%.

Around the Colorado River District, Ridgway, Elkhead, Wolford Mountain, Granby, Dillon and Green Mountain reservoirs are expected to fill. Blue Mesa Reservoir will reach about 11 feet below full. Taylor Park will almost be full.

The Colorado River District closely watches snowpack and streamflow forecasts as they are the mainstays of water supply, ever important for agriculture, recreation, the environment and municipal water providers.

While snowpack is most important, the other building blocks are spring precipitation (weak in 2020) and the summer monsoons (a no-show in 2019). When precipitation falls off and temperatures rise, soils dry out. Dry soils baked by the dry summer of 2019 are also influencing the 2020 runoff forecasts.

When snowpack melts, it first enters the soils until they are saturated and the melt flows into stream courses.

