

Alternatives for ag/urban water uses studied

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Can agriculture remain viable and urban water needs be met in one area of fast-growing Northern Colorado? A two-and-a-half year study, funded by the Colorado Water Conservation Board and facilitated by Colorado State University's Colorado Water Institute, says maybe, but there are no easy answers.

The Poudre Water Sharing (PWS) group, made up of representatives from Cache la Poudre River basin irrigation companies and the city utilities and special districts that provide municipal and industrial water from the Poudre, advised the research team as it collected data, surveyed irrigation company shareholders, and developed descriptions and prototype agreements for alternative water transfer methods that might work in the Poudre basin.

In the end, the group issued a report at the end of June that details why they tackled the question, what they learned and their recommendations for the future.

"The most important outcome of the work is that solid relationships were built among folks from the irrigation companies and those who manage Poudre basin water for domestic uses—relationships that can be called on for future problem solving," said MaryLou Smith with the Colorado Water Institute, part of CSU's Office of Engagement.

The Colorado Water Conservation Board supported the study as part of the state's effort to find ways to avoid "buy and dry," the permanent removal of water from [agriculture](#) use. Avoiding the practice is a goal

stated in the most recent draft of the State Water Plan.

"Overall, the people in our survey sample made it clear that they want something done to address lands being purchased by entities outside of the watershed and the water moved elsewhere," said Alan Bright, associate professor in CSU's Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, who conducted the survey of stakeholders. "They want the water kept in agriculture, but they may not always agree with one another about the best ways to do that."

The need for more [urban water](#) has placed a bull's eye on the Poudre's agricultural water, but there is a certain amount of hesitancy about entering into water sharing agreements at this point.

"While farmers want to see water stay in agriculture, they also want to be sure nothing jeopardizes their right to sell their water. While domestic water providers understand the many benefits irrigated agriculture brings to the area, they don't want to restrict their ability to provide a reliable source of water for their future customers," said Andy Jones of the law firm Lawrence, Jones, Custer and Grasmick, a member of the research team.

A "buy-and-supply" concept surfaced late in the group's discussions, and gained the interest of others outside the group, such as open space managers and conservation groups. The concept involves creating an entity with public/private money that would buy agricultural land and water at full market value from farmers wanting to sell. The entity would put an easement on the land and water, and lease most of it back to those who want to keep farming, keeping the water in agriculture; a certain portion of the water would be leased for urban use. While PWS members were split on their support for the concept, there was a moderate level of interest among irrigation company shareholders, making it an idea worth pursuing.

"Buy-and-supply is an innovative concept that could include discussions surrounding open space, wildlife habitat, and other quality of life benefits agriculture provides," said George Wallace, a PWS member who farms near Wellington and is a representative of the Larimer County Agricultural Advisory Board. "Agriculture brings so much more to the region than immediately meets the eye, amenities that will be sorely missed if we don't move to keep water in agriculture."

The work started by the PWS will continue this fall as a newly adopted initiative of the Poudre Runs Through it Study/Action Work Group, which will broaden the number of interested parties to include environmental, business, and recreational stakeholders along the Poudre River from Fort Collins, Timnath, Windsor and Greeley. The hope is to better understand the feasibility of ag/urban [water](#) sharing arrangements in the Poudre Basin that could result in keeping agriculture viable even as the population in the region grows.

More information: The final report is available online: [www.cwi.colostate.edu/other fi ... 1 Report 5-15-15.pdf](http://www.cwi.colostate.edu/other_files/1_Report_5-15-15.pdf)

Provided by Colorado State University

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