



## 7. WATER: Growth management critical to meeting demand in West (10/01/2009)

Eryn Gable, special to E&E

DENVER -- Solving the West's entrenched water supply problems will require greater cooperation among states and local governments, as well as better integration of planning efforts as the region continues to grow.

That was the message of a conference held here this week sponsored by the Western States Water Council, whose members represent the governors of 18 states and whose mission is to foster greater cooperation in areas of conservation, development and management of water resources.

Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter (D), the event's keynote speaker, stressed the need for states to jointly address water supply challenges, noting that 30 million people in 19 states rely on water from Colorado, but scientists are predicting the Colorado River Basin may have 20 percent less water in the future due to climate change.

"I think we need to find more and better ways to encourage towns, cities and counties to consider how they grow and how that growth dictates water use," Ritter said.

Such efforts should link water-use planning with land-use planning and begin with a shared vision of how the region should develop in the future.

"What will Colorado and the West look like in 50 years if we continue with business as usual?" Ritter asked. "Is this the world that we want our children to inherit, a world that has us not slowing down or stopping or thinking about what the West looks like?"

Tony Willardson, executive director of the Water Council, which is affiliated with the Western Governors' Association, noted that water and development have not been closely linked in the past. "In many instances, we have not looked at water when we consider how we are going to grow," he said.

A 2008 report prepared by the WGA found that states need to integrate growth and water planning to understand the effects of the choices made with regard to development and water resources, Willardson said.

Jennifer Gimbel, executive director of the Colorado Water Conservation Board, said one of the purposes of the conference was to get water- and land-use planners talking to one another.

"We thought it was maybe time to start having these kinds of conversations, and I am thrilled to see so many people here that think maybe it is something we should be thinking about and talking about," Gimbel said.

Other participants stressed that such conversations must take place not on a local and state level but at the watershed level.

John Tubbs, the Interior Department's deputy assistant secretary for water and science, said U.S. laws and governments divide water by political jurisdictions, regions, river basins and uses, but future planning should recognize water as a shared resource.

"I do have hope for the 21st century where, if only because of necessity, water- and land-use planners, scientists and resource managers will build new relationships and institutions to sustain our communities and the environment," Tubbs said.

Some places are already doing watershed-level planning. Brian Walsh of Washington's Department of Ecology, said 36 watersheds in the state have approved water plans. However, Washington lacks a statewide plan, in part because there is still resistance in some regions to water planning.

Sandy Fabritz-Whitney, assistant director of water management for the Arizona Department of Water Resources, said that throughout the West there is disagreement over whether control of water policies should be set at the state or regional level or left to local authorities.

Fabritz-Whitney also identified gaps in knowledge about water needs as a barrier to planning for the future. Western states need to monitor their water usage and determine how much water they need to meet their demands, she said.

### Climate implications

There is also much uncertainty about how climate change will affect future water supplies, although the latest scientific models predict hotter, drier conditions in much of the West. A study recently released by the University of Colorado, Boulder, found that the Colorado River system has a 50-50 chance of fully depleting its reservoir storage by midcentury under current management practices.

"Global climate change will impact the West more than any other region in the United States," Tubbs, the Interior official, said. "Diminishing snowpack, more extreme weather patterns, rising sea levels, higher air and water temperatures affecting ecosystem health, and greater uncertainty are all probable outcomes of climate change."

Eric Kuhn of the Colorado River Water Conservation District said one significant challenge facing water planners is that population growth patterns inevitably shift and water resource plans that meet current needs may not meet needs later on. Because of that, he said, "the tools of the past probably will not work in the future."

Roderick Walston, a water attorney from California, said coordination of land-use and water supply planning in California has been limited by the lack of enforcement mechanisms. There is a tension between water planners and local governments that want to maintain control over land use, he said.

"This may well be the future of the West, if it follows California's example in coordinating water supplies and land-use supplies, as much of the West has followed California's lead in adopting prior appropriation," Walston told the conference.

Legislators also need to decide whether governments should have the authority to deny projects that do not meet the requirements of water plans, Walston said.

U.S. EPA's Bert Garcia said water quality should also be considered as part of local land-use decisions. Garcia said not enough financial resources have been dedicated to improving water quality. For example, federal stimulus funds provided \$6 billion for wastewater systems nationally, but that is hardly enough to make a dent in the estimated \$500 billion in needs.

"Why is EPA interested in discussions about land use and water? Well, it's because we see communities struggling with infrastructure and because we see significant water quality impacts that can result from land-use decisions," Garcia said.

### Challenges net opportunity

Yet despite the many challenges in meeting the West's future water needs, some see opportunity in the region's expected boom. A report released by the Brookings Institution last year predicted that the Intermountain West will see 13 percent of the nation's growth by 2030.

Eric Hecox of the Colorado Water Conservation Board said that the region's growth will give planners a chance to shape the West's future, since as much as three-quarters of the housing stock will be built or rebuilt over the next 20 to 30 years.

Already, some communities have taken steps to link growth patterns and water supplies.

Lyn Kathlene, a senior research associate with the Center for Systems Integration, a public policy think tank, noted that El Paso County, Colo., requires developers to prove a 300-year water supply for homes built in the Denver basin aquifer.

Lorna Stickel of the Portland Water Bureau said Oregon mandates that any city with more than 25,000 people must maintain an urban growth boundary. One result of the more compact development is less water usage overall, she said.

*Gable is an independent energy and environmental writer in Woodland Park, Colo.*

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