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Ashley Jackson

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Drought Parallels and Lessons Learned: 2002-2012

NEW WATER EFFICIENCY PLAN PROGRAM AND COLORADO HOUSE BILL-1051

Kevin Reidy, the State Water Conservation Specialist for the Colorado Water Conservation Board, spoke second. Reidy presented on the current state of Colorado's water conservation policy and legislation, focusing specifically on Colorado House Bill-1051 ("Bill-1051"). State Senator Bruce Whitehead and State Representative Jack Pommer sponsored the bill, and the Colorado legislature adopted it on February 1, 2012. Bill-1051 builds on existing water efficiency and conservation programs and provides water planners with a more accurate picture of current conservation efforts.

Reidy emphasized data collection as a necessary tool that allows the water community to work through uncertainties in Colorado's future supply and demand. He explained that Bill-1051 provides the means for this necessary data collection so water planners will have a more accurate picture of water efficiency efforts and access to centralized data of water efficiency plans throughout the state. Ultimately, Reidy explained, the legislature will funnel the data gathered from Bill-1051 to the Colorado Water Conservation Board ("CWCB"), which will then provide the public with an access point for the data. Reidy noted that this will allow water planners to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the gap between water supply and demand and an overall picture of efficiency efforts statewide.

The water community has received Bill-1051 relatively well. The CWCB is currently creating the online database reporting tool to allow public access to the information. Skeptics are uncertain as to whether the online database will be an effective means of relaying information to the water community. Reidy, however, noted that only time will tell whether Bill-1051 will accomplish all that it set out to do.

Christine Romo

DROUGHT PARALLELS AND LESSONS LEARNED: 2002 TO 2012

In the afternoon, the speakers began to focus on the impacts of drought on Colorado. Nolan Doesken, climatologist for the Colorado Climate Center ("CCC"), presented on the topic of progress and challenges in Colorado's climate variability. He focused on the parallels to and lessons learned from the droughts of 2002 and 2012. Both years experienced annual precipitation well below the seventeen-inch state average, yet Doesken stressed how Colorado is currently more prepared than in 2002 because of lessons it learned from that drought.

In contrast, the last major drought before 2002 occurred over two decades before that, in 1980. Doesken explained that the wet 1990s gave the state a false sense of security and the 2002 drought forced municipalities to reevaluate their water use demands. Even given the higher level of preparedness today, Doesken cautioned that utilities in 2002 could meet the increased demand because state reservoir levels were stable. The less extreme temperatures and lower evapotranspiration rates allowed reservoir levels to maintain stability in 2002, whereas today, reservoir levels are much more variable.

Doesken then described CCC's system of agricultural weather stations, which provide temperature and precipitation data across the state. He noted that providing a constant water supply through variable drought years presents a very difficult challenge for municipalities hoping to encourage water users to become more willing and flexible in their water uses. Municipalities often attempt to appropriately reflect the reality of surrounding environmental conditions with their own water use, but this does not often translate to the end users and households using less water. Utilities continue to encounter the challenge of meeting increased water demand during droughts with depressed water supplies. Doesken expressed a desire for those in attendance to consider the lessons learned in 2002 and 2012 in their approaches to water supply and demand in future droughts.

Ashley Jackson

DROUGHT PLANNING PERSPECTIVES: A SNAPSHOT ON ACTION AND INTENT

Peter Mayer of Aquacraft, Inc. moderated the multi-city panel discussion on drought planning and prompted the panelists with questions about actions their respective cities are taking to prepare for another dry winter.

Taryn Finnessey, Colorado Water Conservation Board ("CWCB") drought climate-change technical specialist, opened up the discussion by describing CWCB's current Drought Mitigation and Response Plan ("Drought Plan"), which was approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in January 2011. Finnessey explained that the Drought Plan tracks drought impacts across Colorado and seeks to better manage drought from the state perspective by compartmentalizing regions of the state and providing flexible and individualized responses to each affected region. The Drought Plan also employs a drought task force consisting of executive directors from the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, Department of Local Affairs, and Department of Agriculture, to brainstorm and implement drought response and mitigation strategies.

Russ Sands from Boulder's Water Quality and Environmental Services spoke next and noted that cities must have emergency plans to respond effectively to drought. He outlined several important components to a drought emergency response: (i) creating a unified message; (ii) effectively disseminating information to the public through media like brochures or yard signs; (iii) pursuing public education within the first seventy-two hours after declaring a drought emergency, as this time is often the most effective to disseminate a message; and (iv) creating an achievable drought plan that realistically manages expectations. Sands also noted that cities must be prepared to act the moment after declaring a drought emergency. When a city instead tries to assemble all these pieces subsequent to declaring an emergency, Sands indicated the plan will likely fail.

Lucas Mouttet, Water Conservation Coordinator for Fort Collins Utilities, discussed recent issues caused by the High Park fire and the consequences of a fire occurring in a city's watershed during a drought. He spoke about the importance of a flexible drought plan to accommodate these tangential issues