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FROM:

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Conservation Position and Principles for Colorado's Water Plan

I. Overview

Water has long been recognized as the lifeblood of Colorado and the rest of the West. Since the mid-19th century, Coloradans have applied their ingenuity to harnessing a reliable supply of water to irrigate agricultural fields and fuel our growing cities and towns. We've now reached a point at which our water sources are increasingly under strain; ingenuity is more important than ever.

The ecology of our rivers and streams, and the enormous economic stake that depends upon healthy rivers, necessitates that Colorado pursues a new approach to water policy that incorporates both our current physical reality and our modern economy. By maximizing the utility of each drop of water, we can balance the needs of the state's growing communities, agriculture, recreation and the environment.

Our organizations are encouraged by the Governor's May 2013 Executive Order which requires Colorado's Water Plan to incorporate the following values:

- A productive economy that supports vibrant and sustainable cities, viable and productive agriculture, and a robust skiing, recreation and tourism industry;
- Efficient and effective water infrastructure promoting smart land use; and
- A strong environment that includes healthy watersheds, rivers and streams, and wildlife.

We fully support these values and offer the following principles to implement them directly in Colorado's Water Plan and the Basin Implementation Plans. We believe Colorado's water future deserves 21st century problem-solving that is every bit as innovative and courageous as the vision and grit that sustained our 19th and 20th century forbearers.

II. Our Vision

Healthy rivers are—and always have been—essential to Colorado’s heritage, identity and way of life. Our rivers inspire and sustain millions of residents and visitors every year. They are a critical driver for our state’s economy. Each year, river-related recreation supports tens of thousands of jobs and produces billions in economic output.

Healthy river flows also sustain wildlife. Keeping vulnerable river-dependent species healthy and resilient preserves flexibility in future water development and river management. And protecting aquatic species before the law has to step in and protect them keeps open a wider range of options for the future.

A key first step to tackling these issues is to realize that the era of free water is over. Due to long-term drought and an increase in water demands across the state, we face the increased risk of over-developing supplies across the State. And this situation will likely get worse in the future. We need to apply great scrutiny to any proposal that would move additional water between basins.

Colorado’s water challenges are solvable, but only if we act wisely and now. Solving the State’s water challenges now—rather than after the rivers are harmed irreparably—will ensure that we maintain Colorado’s important river resources.

III. Solutions—developed collectively—should involve common-sense and cost-effective components:

A. Growing urban areas should take all steps possible to be self-sufficient and avoid costly water imports that negatively impact other communities and river-related values.

Principle 1: Urban water providers should commit to high water conservation targets inside their local plans and in basin implementation plans (BIPs).

- Water efficiency is the cheapest, fastest way for communities to meet their water needs and become self-reliant. Technologies exist that will allow us to be much more efficient with our water, but implementation requires political will.
- Water providers should show how they will meet the “high” level of savings articulated in SWSI 2010.
- State funding (and, if necessary, legislation) should incentivize reaching these targets; e.g., CWCB must limit grant & loan programs to those meeting conservation and efficiency standards.
- Colorado should partner with counties, land use planners, and water utilities to embrace integrated planning that will lower the water footprint of new urban development.
- Consumers have an obligation, as well, to commit—house by house and business by business—to use water wisely and efficiently. Water providers can assist them, through providing education and clear actions available for consumers to take.

Principle 2: It's time to refine the location and timing of the Front Range's municipal water "gap."

- Water is ultimately a local issue; specific projects and processes must be tailored for specific needs.
- Colorado must highlight specific geographic areas and timeframes where new demands are likely to outstrip supply.
- Once needs are specifically understood, water supply solutions should be targeted to meet specific gaps.

Principle 3: Water re-use/recycling projects are the infrastructure of the future.

- Existing trans-basin diversion water and non-tributary groundwater should be re-used to extinction (to the extent allowed by law) before further imports are approved.
- State funding should incentivize an acceleration of re-use.
- Federal funding (e.g., through Title 16 grants) may enable implementation.

Principle 4: The solution for the Front Range is not a large new trans-basin diversion from the Colorado River Basin.

- Once specific water needs are articulated (i.e., the "gap" is localized), some small-scale storage may be needed, for example, to enable use of water that becomes available through conservation, temporary agriculture transfers, and re-use.
- Significant new depletions from West Slope rivers, in contrast, are not tailored to specific water needs and are extremely costly. They risk over-development of the Compact and adverse effects to recreation, rural communities and the environment. As a result, these projects are controversial, divisive, and generate great uncertainty about federal permitting and financing.

- B. Agriculture must be part of the State's water solution as more than 85% of the water used in the state is used for irrigation. The agricultural community has the opportunity to modernize its water infrastructure and irrigation practices and find ways to share water with neighboring users and with cities and to make water available for instream flows while maintaining or improving net agricultural productivity and profitability.**

Principle 5: Creative water-sharing agreements (Alternative Transfer Mechanisms) can support agriculture, meet growing communities' needs, and protect Colorado's rivers.

- The State should support water sharing agreements—ones that are voluntary, compensated, temporary, and flexible—to help meet future municipal and healthy flow needs while making agriculture more profitable.
- Funding, criteria, and new legislation may be needed to make this happen.
- Water rights need to be respected. Farmers should be rewarded for conservation practices, efficiency improvements, and sharing.

- The State should create incentives to encourage infrastructure improvements that benefit agricultural operations, healthy flows, recreation, and rural community values.
- Some small-scale storage may be necessary to help agriculture manage their water more efficiency and provide late season flow needs for rivers and farms.
- A healthy agricultural industry is important for the region’s economy and critical for rural communities throughout the state.

C. Healthy rivers are a vibrant component of the State’s identity, economy and way of life. A State Water Plan must include specific measures to protect and restore these resources.

Principle 6: Structural projects should avoid adverse impacts to instream values and the health of local communities.

- Rural Colorado’s economy rests heavily on river-dependent agriculture, tourism and recreation.
- Many urban areas celebrate the recreational and environmental amenities of their rivers; new and existing water uses should protect, if not enhance, such amenities.
- Projects should have, as a pre-requisite to approval, support from local communities to protect healthy flows and vibrant local economies.
- Projects with multiple beneficiaries are often preferable to single-purpose projects.
- Mitigation for projects must leave adequate river flows to support recreational uses and healthy ecosystems under all future scenarios, even if water availability decreases due to climate change [i.e., the risk of climate change or long-term drought should not be borne by the river].
- Risk management and environmental metrics should be developed to analyze impacts of proposed new supply projects and their compatibility with other consumptive and non-consumptive needs.
- Rebuilding infrastructure damaged by flooding or other disasters should respect and maintain the ecosystem values of river channels and floodplains and ensure future resiliency to variable climate conditions.
- Innovative water management of existing supplies can help protect flows for the environment, recreation, water quality, without adversely affecting yield and while continuing to meet our compacts obligations to downstream states.

Principle 7: Basin Implementation Plans and Colorado’s Water Plan should include a timeline to complete meaningful processes or projects that protect and restore healthy rivers and streams (a/k/a non-consumptive needs).

- Colorado needs to play a greater role in protecting and improving our rivers—not just in avoiding additional harm, but in pro-actively protecting and restoring them.
- Meeting the environmental and recreational needs previously identified inside each basin, as spelled-out in their needs assessments, is an important first step to support the state’s valuable recreation and tourism industry, as well as quality of life for all.

- The BIPs and the Plan should lay out timelines to meet in-stream values. Each BIP should include multiple, meaningful projects or processes that meet identified non-consumptive gaps to ensure we approach meeting these needs with parity to the attention paid to consumptive projects.

Principle 8: All stakeholder groups and the concerned public must have a clear avenue for input.

- The BIPs and Plan will impact millions of Colorado citizens who are unfamiliar with the Inter-basin Compact Committee, the Basin Roundtables and the CWCB. These citizens also are unfamiliar with the technical nature and language associated with these planning processes.
- The State must provide new forms and forums of public notice and opportunities for input, through a concerted outreach effort to concerned citizens, city and county governments, local businesses, and sportsmen groups.

IV. Summary

Colorado’s Water Plan will set the course for the future. It is critical that we do this right. It’s essential the Plan protect the State’s economy, environment, and unique way of life. The principles noted above are foundational to building a future we can all be proud of.

Sincerely,

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