


The Colorado Water Plan

In May 2013, Gov. Hickenlooper directed the state to draft the Colorado Water Plan, in order to provide a direction for water resource use in the coming decades. The plan, which will be drafted by the end of 2014, will aim to ensure a sufficient supply of water for the various users across the state, including agricultural, municipal, industrial, environmental, and recreational needs.

WHAT INSPIRED THE PLAN?

Colorado's water resources are facing two major threats: **population growth and drought**. The state's population is expected to double by 2050, with both the Eastern and Western Slopes likely to have significant growth. New development on the Front Range will bring increasing demand for water from the Western Slope, which contains 80% of the state's supply. Even as more water is required for cities, Colorado has faced ongoing drought since 2002. With climate change, less precipitation could lead to persistent drought conditions. Current projections estimate that by 2030, there will be a 20% gap between Colorado's water supply and the demand.

Water use creates conflicts between different parts of the state, between states, and between different users. Agriculture withdraws over 90% of the utilized water, but farmers, and the Governor, are concerned that additional water will come at the expense of irrigation. So one of the primary goals of the plan is to have the basins come to an agreement that will allow for greater water use by cities, while protecting agricultural use.



American Dippers require clean and fast-moving stream to forage, and are an indicator species for healthy water.

Rick Leche, CC BY-NC-SA


HOW COULD THE PLAN IMPACT BIRDS?

Most species of birds depend on healthy riparian habitats for at least part of their life cycle. Colorado hosts many of these species that nest and migrate throughout the state, including numerous threatened and endangered species.

Bald Eagles, for example, depend on larger rivers, like the Colorado, throughout the year. The unique **American Dipper** requires healthy, free-flowing streams in which they dive for aquatic insects, and **Lewis' Woodpeckers** need natural stream flows in their riparian habitat to help regenerate the mature cottonwoods in which they nest.

Natural stream flows are also critical for maintaining wetlands. **Sandhill Cranes** require wetlands for roosting during migration in Colorado. The federally endangered **Southwestern Willow Flycatcher** nests near wetlands and slow-moving water, as does the **Yellow-Billed Cuckoo**. Both are priority species for Audubon and a focus for Colorado's Division of Wildlife.

The plan may encourage new water supply projects, such as dams and pipelines, that could impact the habitat of these and other water-dependent birds. Certainly, some development may be necessary to support Colorado's growing population, but in order to protect the state's birds and other wildlife, and world-class recreation, water conservation measures should be the first priority.



Lewis' Woodpeckers nest along riparian areas in mature cottonwood forests, which require natural stream flows for regeneration.

Teddy Llovet, CC BY-NC-SA

HOW WILL THE PLAN BE FORMED?

The plan will be drafted by the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB). Statewide water decisions have been made by the CWCB since its creation in 1937. Increasing concerns in the past decade about future water supply led to the passage of the *Colorado Water for the 21st Century Act* in 2005. This Act created 9 basin roundtables, which includes the eight major river basins in Colorado, and the Denver metro area. To facilitate cooperation among the basins, the Act also created the Interbasin Compact Committee (IBCC). The roundtables will engage in planning for their own basin, and the IBCC will help negotiate a statewide plan.

Each of the basin roundtables is made of about 40 members, including representatives from one of each of the cities and counties in the basin, and one from each of the agricultural, industrial, environmental, recreational, and water supplier fields. The Chair of the roundtable represents their basin on the CWCB, which contains 10 voting members -- one from each of the roundtables, and the Director, James Eklund, appointed by the Governor.

The CWCB will be holding bimonthly meetings, and plans to present a draft by December 2014, and the final plan by December 2015.



Southwestern Willow Flycatchers depend on healthy riparian systems.

Get Involved!

Birds and Colorado ecosystems need your voice, so that they can be represented as the plan is developed.

Join the Action Network!

Stay informed on water and river issues in Colorado and across the West by joining the Western Rivers Action Network. Visit the Audubon Rockies website to join.

Attend water board meetings

To get more involved, you can attend the Basin Roundtable and CWCB meetings, and provide public comments where possible.

Conserve water in your home

Reducing water use in our homes and cities may reduce the need for potentially harmful new projects. Explore low-flow fixtures and water-wise landscaping to help keep water in our streams.

Colorado Water Use Facts

Water withdrawals by sector



91%

Agriculture

Source: USGS, SWSI



7.5%

Municipal & Industrial

The 8 river basins in Colorado



Western Slope
80% of the water

Eastern Slope
80% of the population