

opinion

Guest Commentary: The future of Colorado's rivers

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By **Greg Speer**

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I moved to Fort Collins five years ago from a non-arid region of the country. Shortly after moving I learned of an ill-conceived water development proposal that threatens the very existence of the trout fishery in my local river — my new "home water." This fishery was one of the primary attractions in selecting our new hometown.

I became quite concerned by this disastrous water proposal and soon found myself deeply involved in the effort to defeat it. As a result, I have had quite an education in matters pertaining to water in the arid American West and, more specifically, Colorado. My education is of course by no means complete and never will be. As it evolves though, I find myself ever more dismayed by Colorado water policy.

I believe our current water policy will have terrible consequences for the quality of life for present and future residents, not to mention all the river-dependent flora and fauna of our state. It violates the most basic tenet of long term asset management: Do not spend principal. The idea of course is to live off of dividends and interest and preserve their source. Colorado's rivers are a precious

principal asset which pays dividends in the form of economic and quality of life benefits. For years we have been spending this principal and this is foolish if we wish to continue to enjoy the dividends our rivers provide us. Looked at another way, we are spending the inheritance of future generations of Coloradoans.

I think there would be broad agreement that the two pillars of the "Colorado Quality of Life" are our mountains and our rivers, and it seems clear to me that the latter is on the verge of crumbling if radical changes in water policy are not soon embraced.

The situation with my local river is unfortunately emblematic of the situation facing many, if not most, Colorado rivers with the Big Girl, the Colorado River, being the poster child for this whole story.

What is striking to me is that current approaches to water policy all seem to be driven by postponing the day of reckoning as long as possible — "kicking the can down the road" to use recent political parlance referring to how policy makers keep putting

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off hard choices and decisions.

By day of reckoning, I mean that time when we must squarely face the fact that we simply have no more "excess" water to remove from our rivers. Some, myself included, feel that this reckoning should have occurred some time ago, that we are already past the tipping point for many of our rivers.

Our current situation is the ultimate result of the Doctrine of Prior Appropriation that states that "the right to divert the unappropriated waters of any natural stream to beneficial uses shall never be denied." Early on this doctrine served our state well by bringing order to the chaos of unregulated water diversions.

But today, this same doctrine, cemented in the 1876 Colorado Constitution, essentially guarantees the appropriation of every last drop of water in our rivers and severely degrading our quality of life. This even though, according to that Constitution, it is the people of Colorado who own the water. The doctrine's lack of a shut-off mechanism is simply not sustainable and fails to match what today's public really wants.

Colorado water policy planning has recently been focused on the year 2050 and how best to fill the "gap" between water supply and demand up to that date. My question is, what happens then? The basic problem of ever growing demand (population) and a fixed, likely diminishing with climate change, resource will of course continue indefinitely beyond that arbitrary 2050 date.

Do we put off the hard choices until then by which time many of our rivers will essentially

be dried up if current approaches continue? Or, do we agree that the day of reckoning is here today and make the tough choices which will keep the remaining water in our rivers and hopefully even start putting water back into them?

Doing so will require a whole new mind set and perhaps an amendment to the Colorado Constitution.

It is time to park the can.

Greg Speer is a retired physician living in Fort Collins. He serves on the board of directors of Save The Poudre: Poudre Waterkeeper.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an online-only column and has not been edited.

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