

Ag Water Interests Convene the First Colorado Agricultural Water Summit

The Colorado Agricultural Water Summit was held on November 4, 2005 at the Adams County Fairgrounds in Brighton, Colorado. The Summit was a one-day facilitated process designed to engage Colorado Ag water leaders in identifying and addressing key water issues facing the industry. The goal of the Summit was to initiate a process for unifying and strengthening Ag's voice in water management and policy.

Key Colorado agricultural organizations nominated delegates to the Summit to represent diverse perspectives and industry sectors. These organizations included: Colorado Farm Bureau, Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, Western Dairy Association, Colorado Association of Conservation Districts, Colorado Livestock Association, Colorado Green Industry, Colorado Cattleman's Association, Colorado Grain and Feed Association, Colorado Wheat Growers Association, Colorado Corn Growers, Colorado Department of Agriculture, and Colorado State University. The Summit was facilitated by MaryLou Smith of Aqua Engineering, with assistance from a team of CSU Cooperative Extension faculty.

The Summit delegates heard from several speakers during the day including Rick Brown of the CWCB, Ag Commissioner Don Ament, DNR Director Russ George, Frank Jaeger of Parker Water, David Robbins of Hill and Robbins, Rep. Kathleen Curry and Rep Diane Hoppe. These speakers discussed the stresses on Ag water supplies and the need for Ag to look for creative solutions to help maintain viable systems for those who wish to continue farming and ranching.

A series of questions were posed to the delegates for discussion in breakout groups and during the general sessions. The questions were designed to help the delegates think through the challenges and opportunities that Ag might face in uniting around water issues. These included: 1) What are the interests Colorado Agriculture wants to preserve in any water negotiations or transactions? 2) What interests unite us and which ones divide us when it comes to water? 3) How can Colorado Agriculture unite to promote our interests in regards to water? 4) What solutions can we come up with to reconcile the differences which divide us from each other and from other users of Colorado's water? 5) What strategies or options can we organize ourselves around?

While many diverse opinions were expressed by the delegates over the course of the day, some common themes and difficult challenges emerged. The delegates identified significant barriers that tend to splinter the agricultural community: East slope versus West Slope, ground water versus surface water appropriators, senior versus junior water rights, water shortages, and proximity to urban water markets. One delegate remarked that water was the single most divisive issue facing Colorado agriculture. Additionally, some paradoxes were identified that challenge the Ag community. Chief among these is the individual right to sell water rights to the highest bidder, versus the general interest in thriving rural communities and a healthy agricultural economy. A second paradox is a rock-solid belief in the doctrine of prior appropriation, in contrast with the clear need for more flexibility in the way water is administered in Colorado.

Many common interests were identified that serve to unite agriculture. Among these is the general interest in helping farmers and ranchers remain profitable, with adequate water supplies and supporting infrastructure. Unreliable water supplies will eventually erode the markets for Colorado Ag products that have been developed as a result of much community effort. Intermittent water will not preserve the ditch infrastructures and operating practices, nor will labor be reliably present if the field work is uncertain. In general, the delegates stated that a strong agricultural economy serves Colorado well by

providing food security, jobs, rural communities, open space, wildlife habitat, a sense of our heritage, and a buffer to the environmental and social impacts of population growth.

The delegates discussed many ideas for strengthening Ag's position in water management and policy. In general, it was agreed that greater communication and cooperation both within Ag and with the larger water community is needed to find solutions that are in the best interest of Colorado. More storage, more flexibility, more options for Ag producers, more cooperation from federal agencies, more education and more research are all needed to help us develop cooperative solutions to Colorado's water needs, while sustaining a healthy Ag industry in the state.

At the end of the Ag Water Summit, delegates focused their attention on future steps for the Ag community as it attempts to unite and strengthen its ability to negotiate for a better future. They discussed the need for a new state-wide Ag water organization, versus the potential benefits of working more closely with the Colorado Water Congress. In the end, a decision was made to have the participating Ag organizations work with the Ag Council to form an interim think-tank to further explore the options and strategies that the Ag groups should cooperatively pursue. The interim group will report back to the community at large at the upcoming Ag Outlook Forum on February 23, 2006 in Denver. For more information, contact Reagan Waskom at (970) 491-2947 or reagan.waskom@colostate.edu.