

#6 UPPER COLORADO RIVER

COLORADO

THREAT: WATER DIVERSIONS

Summary

The Upper Colorado River and its tributaries are home to prized trout fisheries, whitewater recreation and wild-life, drawing anglers and paddlers from across the country. However, more than 100 years of water diversions have drained the river to dangerously low levels. If two new major proposed water withdrawal projects move ahead without adequate protections, the river may no longer be able to sustain the values Coloradoans prize so highly. The Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which are currently assessing these projects, should require conservation and efficiency measures before allowing additional water withdrawals. The regulatory agencies, conservation interests, and people of Colorado must insist that the water projects contain key protections for river health. With appropriate foresight and consideration for the long-term protection of the river's health, we can usher in a new era of stewardship and recovery for the Upper Colorado.

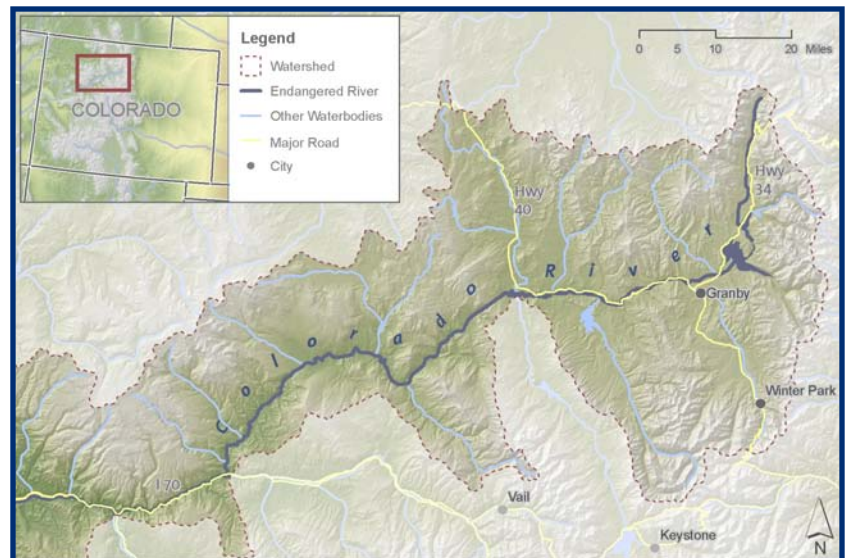
The River

The Upper Colorado River begins in Rocky Mountain National Park and flows southwest toward Utah. The area is home to 93,000 full time residents and hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. The Upper Colorado and its major tributaries provide water to the resort areas of Granby, Winter Park, Breckenridge, Keystone, and Vail, and a large percentage of the urban Front Range of Colorado. The river is a recreational hotspot, with its gold medal trout fisheries, world class rafting and kayaking, and outstanding scenic canyons. These values have qualified the river, from near its source to its confluence with the Roaring Fork in Glenwood Springs, as a candidate for federal Wild and Scenic River designation.

The Threat

The Colorado headwaters have been subject to major water withdrawals and depletions for over 100 years. Signs of deterioration are becoming evident, as populations of key species that are indicators of the rivers health have shown major declines since the last major water diversion project was completed. Increased water temperatures, coupled with the inability to flush highway sand and other sediment due to severely reduced flows, are causing harmful changes throughout the system.

Compounding this decline in river health, precipitation in the Upper Colorado is expected to decline considerably, with more coming as rain rather than snow, due



to climate change. Spring runoff will occur earlier and less snow will be available throughout the summer to provide abundant flows of cold water. While climate change may reduce flows in the Colorado River, it will increase the demand for diversions for landscape irrigation, which accounts for half of residential water use.

Two new water withdrawal projects under review by the Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Windy Gap Firming Project and the Mofat Tunnel Collection System Project, would lead to the diversion of even more water from an already heavily-tapped basin. If these projects proceed as planned, the flows of the Upper Colorado could be reduced to levels



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that can no longer maintain a healthy river. Conversely, if the projects incorporate appropriate river protections, this could herald an era of water supply planning that better balances water development with the needs of the river.

What Must Be Done

The future of the Upper Colorado River could be largely determined this year with decisions on the Windy Gap and Moffat projects. The Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must include conservation and efficiency requirements in the Final Environmental Impact Statements for each of these projects before allowing any additional water withdrawals. Local governments, state agencies, and concerned Coloradoans must continue to be actively engaged to ensure adequate protections are provided for maintaining river health.

Furthermore, significant negotiations between the headwater counties and major diverters will likely conclude in 2010. If successful, these negotiations could create a new paradigm for water diversion projects in Colorado, ensuring that they consider both domestic and agricultural needs while also meeting the needs of healthy rivers and wildlife.

At the same time we also have a chance to provide significant protections for the Upper Colorado, its outstanding values, and its spectacular scenery. There is a cooperative process underway to consider protections for the Upper Colorado that will reach a critical stage in 2010.

Ultimately, citizen engagement and understanding is essential to promote the changes needed to protect the Upper Colorado River from future threats. People must understand that the water they use comes from the rivers they treasure, and the viability of those rivers is threatened by excessive use. Each individual and family can make a difference by reducing their household water use and avoiding wasteful practices.

Citizens should also urge public officials to tap the potential of conservation, efficiency, reuse, and operations that help restore river health. These smart strategies could reduce or eliminate the need for further diversions from the Colorado River and its tributaries.



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