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Sep 20, 2009 12:01 pm US/Mountain

Feds: Not Enough Green River Water For Pipeline

BEN NEARY, Associated Press Writer

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's initial assessment of how much water could be diverted in coming decades from the Green River basin in Wyoming is far less than the amount a private entrepreneur has applied to draw for a planned pipeline to Colorado, agency officials said.

Developer Aaron Million, of Fort Collins, Colo., has proposed building a private pipeline to carry up to 250,000 acre feet of water a year from the Green River. He proposes to move 225,000 acre feet to Colorado's Front Range and 25,000 acre feet to eastern Wyoming.

An acre foot is about 325,000 gallons. Million's \$3 billion proposal has drawn fierce opposition in southwestern Wyoming. Sweetwater County and the cities of Green River and Rock Springs are pooling hundreds of thousands of dollars to fight the project, citing concerns about its effect on fishing and recreation in the area.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is working on an environmental impact study on the likely effects of building the pipeline. Officials say the study should determine exactly how much water is available.

The Bureau of Reclamation, which manages Flaming Gorge Reservoir, conducted a preliminary study in early 2007 in response to Million's proposal to draw water from the reservoir and the river upstream. It pegged the basin's annual water availability at 85,000 acre feet less than what Million proposes to draw.

The study found that up to 165,000 acre feet of water could be drawn from the reservoir each year through 2049 while still allowing enough water to generate hydropower and to meet the needs of endangered fish species downstream.

Drawing 165,000 acre feet a year over 40 years would draw the level of Flaming Gorge Reservoir down from its current elevation of 6,030 feet above sea level to just above 5,900 feet, the study found. According to bureau figures, the reservoir has a surface area of nearly 30,000 acres when its elevation is at 6,000 feet and its surface area would drop to just under 11,000 acres at the 5,900 foot level.

After 2050, as development in Wyoming increases, the bureau study projected Flaming Gorge Reservoir could sustain an annual diversion rate of 120,000 acre feet. The agency is updating that draft analysis, and agency officials say their projections of the amount of available water may well go lower.

Malcolm Wilson, chief of the Water Resources Group for the Bureau of Reclamation in Salt Lake City, said the bureau's draft study doesn't support Million's plans.

"I think Mr. Million's aware of our numbers, and we're not sure where he gets his," Wilson said. "Certainly what we saw in this study, as you can see, does not support his numbers. But maybe he has something else."

Increased development in Wyoming, climate change and the needs of endangered species downstream all could reduce the agency's final conclusions of how much water would be available for the pipeline, said Dave Trueman, head of the Bureau of Reclamation's Resources Management Division in Salt Lake City.

Million said he believes the bureau's draft water availability report is extremely conservative. He said his own consulting engineers have determined that the Green River basin can support the pipeline project.

"I think the important thing from the public's standpoint is that there's a major surplus of water in the system, above the needs of endangered species, boating and all those things," Million said Wednesday. "And that will either be proven out, or not, in the (environmental review) process."

Million said the amount of water he applied for at first is not an absolute, but an amount he used to start the application process. He said he's considering scaling back his application for water, but hasn't done so yet. He has said that he would cancel the project if its environmental impacts couldn't be mitigated.

Although Million is seeking to draw water in Wyoming, the water itself would come from the state of Colorado's share under the Colorado River Compacts — formal agreements among Western states over how to allocate water on the river system.

Jeff Fassett, a former Wyoming state engineer, is consulting with Million on the diversion project. He said the amount of water available for the pipeline would decrease as Wyoming uses more of its share of water on the Green River. Million anticipates being able to divert higher amounts of water until it's needed elsewhere, Fassett said.

Fassett said that project developers believe that 250,000 acre feet of water per year, "would certainly be available for a great number of years."

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