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West's Water Needs Differ: As Competing Demands Press Water Resources, States Adjust Rules.

By Chris Woodka, The Pueblo Chieftain, Colo.

Sep. 30--DENVER -- States across the West are facing the same dilemma as Colorado: Too many people and not enough water.

Their circumstances may be different, but the approach is instructive for Colorado as it deals with what could become a crisis in the future.

Water officials from other states shared how they are coping at a conference sponsored by the Western State Water Council this week.

"Growth is coming to the West and we're going to need more supplies than the Colorado River can give us," Kay Brothers, deputy general manager for the Southern Nevada Water Authority bluntly told the group.

Las Vegas has failed to cover its bets on water supply more than once, Brothers pointed out. Up until the 1980s, the city was growing at about 2 percent a year, and competing water districts figured they were covered well into the 21st century, and were actually trying to use more Colorado River water to broaden their claims.

When the growth rate hit 6 percent in the 1980s, Nevada thought Arizona's unused share of the Colorado could tide it over for 20-30 years until new sources were found, a plan nixed by Arizona. Turning to Lake Mead, Nevada was alarmed to see its elevation fall during a decade-long drought.

Finally, Vegas has had to cash in several piles of chips to meet its needs -- groundwater banks in Arizona, Nevada and California, groundwater mining and ag dry-up within Nevada and paying cash to tear out turf.

"Things change. You can't put all your eggs in one basket," Brothers said.

"It's very important for us to develop other resources."

Over in Texas, there's a different setup.

There might be enough water, but it's not in the right place. Parts of the state have been in drought since 1996. Dallas has grown faster than its supply of water, said Carolyn Brittin, deputy executive administrator of the Texas Water Development Board.

In the past, water was a top-down activity in Texas, with permits issued for use wherever that use popped up. Groundwater is still not administered. Now, the state is trying to incorporate local decisions in its long-range water planning for storage and delivery, Brittin said.

Conservation and reuse are becoming popular concepts, but Texas still doesn't mess with land-use planning. Before it's all done, 1.5 million acre-feet will have to come off farms unless the state can develop some of its 20 identified reservoir sites. Land regulation appears to be a last resort.

"We're going to grow . . . I find it fascinating that you would contemplate permits for subdivisions based on water availability," Brittin said. "That's pie in the sky for me, because I'm from Texas."

New Mexico seems to have run out of water long ago -- some irrigation goes back for centuries in time -- but will need 100,000 acre-feet of new surface supply for future growth, said John Longworth, water use and conservation chief for the state.

"About 90 percent of our water supply is groundwater. Generally, it is mined," Longworth said.

In Arizona -- perennially short of water and rapidly growing -- the burden is on land developers to show there is a 100-year supply of water for new sites, said Sandy Fabritz-Whitney, assistant director for water management with the Arizona Department of Water Resources.

Since 1973, the state has moved from laws requiring disclosure of future water availability to demonstrating the supply.

"You cannot sell a lot without a 100-year water supply," she said.

The state in 2004 began drought planning that requires communities to have a plan in place to provide water for at least 20 years, Fabritz-Whitney said.

Washington -- where most of the population lives in the wettest part of the state -- has regulations that incorporate environmental concerns, local planning and assuring future supplies, said Brian Walsh of the Washington Department of Ecology.

"You have to have a capital facilities plan that shows how you are going to accomplish (a water supply shown in a comprehensive plan)," Walsh said. "There has to be physical and legal availability."

Watershed planning has not developed in the state because most of the water in the state has not been adjudicated, Walsh added.

California has strict environmental controls on water and land-use planning as a result of a 1970 statute modeled on the National Environmental Policy Act that courts have made into a doctrine that requires water planning in local land-use decisions, said California water lawyer Roderick Watson.

California legislators in the past five years have made water management plans and assessments mandatory as well, Watson said.

"Local government has to consider the environmental effects on water . . . on future water supplies and future users," Watson said. "This may well be the future of the West if the other states follow California's example."

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