

# Keeping Colorado's water – and farms

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*Opinion by Hank Brown*

Without new water, tens of thousands of acres of irrigated farms will be dried up in Colorado in the next few decades.

New homes require new water and by far the least expensive source of water in Colorado is agricultural water. Farmers simply cannot pay what developers can for water. Over 90 percent of our consumptive use of water in Colorado is by agriculture, so there is plenty of water to satisfy the state's need for growth.

So what is the problem?

Taking water used by agriculture for new homes involves drying up thousands of acres of our most productive irrigated farms. The result will be higher temperatures in the summer, more carbon dioxide in our atmosphere, and the loss of food and fiber production in Colorado.

What is the answer? The Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP) is being proposed by northern Colorado cities and water districts to save for Colorado thousands of acre-feet of water that is now being lost to Nebraska. The water belongs to Colorado under the federally recognized interstate compact, yet from 2009 to 2011, more than 1 million acre-feet of water left the state — water the state had rights to use.

What will the project do for our environment? It will improve minimum stream flow, protect against flood and drought, and help prevent the drying up of our farm land. Without NISP, environmental studies estimate that an additional 100 square miles of northern Colorado farmland will be dried up.

Newcomers to Colorado sometimes do not understand the role that water management and storage has played in improving Colorado's environment. Two-thirds of our water flows in the spring runoff and many of our rivers would dry up completely in the late fall and winter if it were not for water storage. By reducing the dangers of spring floods and providing water availability year-round, we have considerably improved Colorado's environment. We have literally transformed what explorers called the Great American Desert into one of the most beautiful states in the nation.

Let's keep Colorado beautiful and support NISP.

*Hank Brown is a former U.S. senator and congressman from Colorado, and was president of the University of Colorado from 2005 to 2008.*

