

Opinion: We must conserve, store more water

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In 1957, when the Colorado Big-Thompson water project went fully online, 85 percent of the water coming from the Western Slope of Colorado was owned by farmers in northeastern Colorado. The rest went to municipal and industrial use.

Today, farmers own 34 percent of C-BT water. During the past five and a half decades, farmers have sold their C-BT shares, mostly to cities in northern Colorado, because they learned that farming wasn't an easy way to make a living, or their water and land represented their 401K plan.

Because of the drought in two of the past three years in Colorado, the price of water is skyrocketing. Since January of this year, for example, a unit of C-BT water has nearly doubled, from \$9,500 to \$18,500.

Thankfully, farming has been more lucrative in the past three to five years as commodity prices have spiked. The result is that more farmers are holding on to their water. It's a simple supply-and-demand equation that has produced such a spike in water prices: More farmers are holding on to their water, and ongoing drought concerns have made less water available for sale.

As we look into the future, it becomes increasingly obvious how important water is in this part of the country. And it leads us to this point: More water storage and an increased emphasis on conservation are both necessary for the co-survival of agriculture and cities in northeast Colorado in the next several decades.

We remain surprised, for example, that more severe watering restrictions are not in place for Greeley and some other northern Colorado cities. After a wet spring, it didn't seem all that inappropriate that Greeley stuck with its three-times-a-week watering restrictions, even though many communities across the state have adopted tougher restrictions.

But after an extremely dry June, it seems time for Greeley to reconsider. Anything the city can do to save water, making more available to lease to farmers, strikes us as a wise decision, not only for farmers but for the entire northern Colorado economy.

It's a simple fact that if we want agriculture to survive in this area, municipal residents must back away from their infatuation with green lawns. As a community, we must become more aware of the benefits of xeriscaping and other landscaping methods that reduce our reliance on heavy water consumption.

And in the same breath, we must realize that there are limits to how much municipal water can be saved for ag use. We must remember that agriculture consumes nearly 85 percent of the water in the state, and it seems undeniable that more water storage is necessary to ensure the survival of the industry here.

If we don't have more storage, it seems likely that the trend of the past five decades will continue. More water will convert to municipal ownership, and in dry years, less and less water will be available for farming.

"It's certainly not farmers who are paying these high prices right now," said Brian Werner, spokesman and historian with the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which operates the C-BT system.

By and large, it's municipalities and residential developers who have the money to buy water at today's high prices. Without conservation and more water storage, we can expect less and less water to be available for agriculture, and that's not good news for Weld County.