

A Victory for Upper Colorado River Conservation

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By Scott Willoughby

Colorado River advocates are celebrating an important conservation victory after softening a portion of the blow from the one-two punch that threatens to knock out the reeling upper Colorado River through Grand County.

After years of negotiation, a multiparty agreement was approved Tuesday by the Grand County board of commissioners. The agreement is expected to provide significant protections for the threatened river by offsetting impacts from the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District's proposed Windy Gap Firming Project (WGFP). The agreement negotiated in part by Trout Unlimited, the Upper Colorado River Alliance and Grand County staff is part of a permit issued in order for the WGFP to move forward.

TU has long advocated for increased restrictions on the project that further taps into the Colorado River headwaters by pumping additional water across the Continental Divide through the Colorado-Big Thompson Project built around the Windy Gap Reservoir near Granby. Already, an annual average of 60 percent of the native flow is removed from the river's headwaters, primarily via the Colorado-Big Thompson Project and Denver Water's Moffat Tunnel Collection System.

The proposed expansion of the Moffat diversion serves as the secondary blow to the Colorado and its Fraser River tributary by combining to reduce native flows by about 75 percent annually, much of that from the Fraser River itself.

For the moment, though, impacts to fish and wildlife dependent upon the state's namesake river appear reduced to some degree because of the conditions included in the permit approved by Grand County Commissioners. Highlighting the requirements for water diversion:

- Prevent stream temperature impacts by restricting the ability to divert water during low flows in the summer.
- Provide periodic "flushing flows" every third and fifth year to cleanse the river bottom during runoff.
- Require the construction of a Windy Gap Reservoir bypass to connect the river, in accordance with a bypass study and funding agreement.

The bypass requirement is considered the linchpin of the agreement after a Colorado Parks and Wildlife biologist's study last year pointed to Windy Gap Reservoir as a primary cause for steep declines in aquatic life and habitat in the Colorado River. The study flagged the need for periodic flushing flows to help scour the river bottom and prevent the buildup of choking algae and sediment, along with a bypass channel around or through Windy Gap that would reconnect the river, improve water quality and boost river health.

"I'm very pleased with how things have turned out. We've been working on this for a while now," said Mely Whiting, counsel for Trout Unlimited. "This is the right way of doing things, the right way to develop some of these water projects. It's a compromise, but it shows that you can do these projects in a smart way."

Lamenting a lack of cooperation from Denver Water with regard to the Moffat expansion's impact on the Colorado and Fraser rivers, Whiting added, "One down, and I hope one to go."

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