

Thumbs up for Windy Gap Project; thumbs down for Moffat expansion

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Guest Commentary by Drew Peternell

Near the end of 2012, a remarkable thing happened: a conservation group and a water utility agreed on a plan to protect the upper Colorado River in Grand County.

After several years of impasse, Trout Unlimited and the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District reached agreement on how to protect the already stressed upper Colorado from Northern's planned expansion of its Windy Gap water diversion project.

The agreement came down to this: more flows, more monitoring, and more river habitat restoration. The added conditions will help ensure that the upper Colorado River remains a gold-medal stretch of trout water.

For years, TU has said it could support two proposed water diversions from the Colorado River to the Front Range—Northern's Windy Gap and Denver Water's Moffat Firming project—if they contained adequate protections for the upper Colorado River system, which has been damaged by low flows, high temperatures, and choking sediment and algae.

To their credit, Northern officials worked out a deal with TU, Grand County, and other stakeholders to guarantee the needed protections against the damage that could result from the Windy Gap proposal.

That's why Trout Unlimited now supports the Windy Gap project.

This was a historic agreement, as ground-breaking as Denver Water's 2011 Colorado River Cooperative Agreement with West Slope interests.

But here's the difference—Denver Water's agreement does not address the future impacts of its proposed Moffat project on the Colorado River or its major tributary, the Fraser River. In fact, the agreement specifically acknowledges that it is not intended to do so.

When it was announced, TU praised the Cooperative Agreement because it includes a number of positive provisions, like increased water conservation efforts and limits on Denver Water's service area. But we cautioned that Denver's agreement does not solve the problems that would be caused by its Moffat expansion. That point largely got lost in the congratulatory hoopla.

We don't want to dismiss what Denver Water has put on the table. But it's not enough to prevent the Moffat project from throwing the upper Colorado and Fraser Rivers into continued decline.

That's why TU cannot endorse the Moffat expansion.

Trout Unlimited, Grand County landowners, and other stakeholders are urging Denver Water to follow Northern's lead and agree to provisions that will protect the Colorado and Fraser Rivers from the Moffat project diversions.

So far, Denver Water has refused to listen. That's frustrating because what TU and others are asking for is reasonable, affordable, and doable.

We're asking for three basic things:

- periodic high-volume flushing flows to scour the Fraser River and keep it clean and healthy for aquatic life;
- temperature monitoring that would require Denver Water to halt diversions if water temperatures are in violation of state standards;
- and an ongoing “adaptive management” agreement that requires Denver Water to monitor river conditions and respond to unforeseen problems caused by the diversions.

These protections would set the Colorado and Fraser Rivers on the path to recovery, not continued decline. And Denver citizens would support the measures. A survey by Denver Water of its own customers found strong backing for protecting mountain resources like the Colorado and Fraser Rivers.

Let's get the job done right and make the Moffat project—like Northern's Windy Gap—a model of smart water planning and cooperation. Working together, we can keep the Colorado and Fraser Rivers healthy and protect Colorado's mountain playgrounds and quality of life.

Drew Peternell is director of Trout Unlimited's Colorado Water Project.