

Testimony of Jay Winner  
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The Fryingpan-Arkansas Project promised a golden future for the Arkansas Valley in the sweltering years of the 1950s. Already ravaged by the drought of the 1930s, the valley's residents embraced the prospect of additional water with unprecedented enthusiasm. Now, there would be a new supply of water and insurance against the droughts of the future.

Now, 45 years after the inception of the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project, that golden future has turned into a last stand for the communities east of Pueblo, the apparent losers so far in a race to develop increasingly scarce water resources in the Arkansas Valley.

Has the project met its purpose? For the major population centers of the valley, Colorado Springs and Pueblo, the project has done an admirable job. It has provided the storage that allows these cities to continue to grow.

The Western Slope has benefited as well, with compensatory storage that has allowed for stable flows to aid the environment and a new source of water for its people.

For the farms east of Pueblo, it has provided a temporary source of water that merely replaced other, more difficult-to-maintain sources of water. In fact, the conversion of Twin Lakes from an agricultural buffer to a municipal reservoir was hastened by the promise of Fry-Ark water.

But farms have not prospered as intended by the 1962 Fryingpan-Arkansas authorizing legislation. Irrigated acreage has decreased since the project began, canals continue to be short in supply and the ditches are the targets of unceasing raids on their water supply for municipal and industrial uses.

By design, the Fry-Ark Project offered no relief to Colorado in its interstate compact on the Arkansas River with Kansas. After a trip to the United States Supreme Court, the valley finds its supply of agricultural water even shorter.

For the communities east of Pueblo, the Fry-Ark Project has so far been a disaster. An economy once bolstered by thriving farms, and the demand for goods and services by rural families, has become a string of economically depressed communities struggling to survive.

The poor water quality of the valley was recognized in the earliest congressional testimony on the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project. The remedy was to develop water resources as a primary supply for cities like Rocky Ford, La Junta, Las Animas and

Lamar. Today, the Arkansas Valley Conduit remains only a dream for those cities, while the federal government is taking steps toward projects that will only worsen water quality in incremental, but deadly, steps.

Those communities have been through a series of last stands: the decline of the family farm, the collapse of the regional sugar beet industry and the endless water raids.

Meanwhile, the city of Colorado Springs has thrived beyond all expectations of the hopeful people who were forming the Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy District 50 years ago. At that time, it was smaller than Pueblo, a quaint mountain city seemingly in league with its partners in the Arkansas Valley.

Even as Colorado Springs sat at the table with those other cities, the city's water planners were preparing for a growth explosion. On its own, the city built a pipeline to import water from the Colorado River basin. With Aurora, the city built another pipeline and turned the spigot off in Crowley County. Through the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project, Colorado Springs and its Fountain Valley partners have benefited through a pipeline that taps into Pueblo Dam.

For the past 20 years, Colorado Springs has sought to use the Fry-Ark Project mainly for its own benefit, rather than in concert with other members of the district. The acquisition of water rights in the back yards of its neighbors, the request for yet another pipeline from Pueblo Dam and the push for more storage in Pueblo Reservoir, which rarely fills, all are evidence of how the project will benefit this growth machine in the future.

Through its partnership with Colorado Springs, Aurora has bullied its way into the Arkansas Valley as well. Without the Homestake Project, Aurora never would have gained a toehold in the Arkansas Valley and developed the absurd premise of moving one-third of its annual water supply 300 miles from what were once productive farms. The Bureau of Reclamation has compounded that technical and moral error through its annual contracts with Aurora. In just three days, the Bureau of Reclamation is planning to finalize a contract that will tie up part of the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project for the next 40 years.

Aurora should never have been allowed into the Arkansas Valley through a federal project before all of the needs of the valley were satisfied. Within the Southeastern District, there are communities whose water needs have never been met by the project. This past year, the district struggled mightily for more than nine months, to come up with a way to accommodate Pueblo West and Manitou Springs.

In Lake County, where two of the project's major lakes are located, officials complain about rough treatment at the hands of federal water development. At the other end of the valley, residents in Kiowa County have not received one drop of water through the project.

Yet Aurora is promoted to the head of the class when it comes to water exchanges in its pending contract with the Bureau of Reclamation.

It's no wonder that in 2002, the voters in the five counties in the Lower Arkansas Valley — Bent, Crowley, Otero, Prowers and Pueblo — voted overwhelmingly to form the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District. The district would never have been needed if the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project and Southeastern district had done their job.

Here there were no plans for grand water projects. There were no golden promises made. Embroiled in yet another drought, the residents of the five counties formed the district as a defensive measure to protect themselves from even more losses. In a way, it was yet another “last stand.”

The quality of water, as much as the quantity of water, is at risk. Colorado Springs and Aurora trade pristine mountain water for the water of poor quality from the Lower Arkansas Valley through exchanges — exchanges made possible by the reservoirs of the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project.

{Do demonstration here}

The poor quality of water for downstream users was well documented more than 50 years ago. Instead of the making that water better — the real golden promise of the Fryingpan Arkansas Project — the federal government has established the means to adopt policies that will actually make the water worse.

As pressures on Colorado water by outside municipal users grow in coming years, what does the future hold for the Arkansas River? Do we continue to let the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project be used as a siphon that will continue to degrade water quality in the basin? Or do we complete the golden promise of the project for the communities, particularly those east of Pueblo, originally intended?

The ultimate question for water users in the Lower Arkansas Valley is: “How many more last stands can we survive?”

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