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commentary

Bad projects never die

By Ed Quillen
Denver Post Columnist

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The U.S. Department of the Interior met with Western governors yesterday in Las Vegas, trying to find a way to share the pain of a drought-stricken Colorado River basin among its seven states. Meanwhile, a big water diversion from our Western Slope emerged from its coffin.

It's generally known as the Union Park Project, and it just got an endorsement from state Sen. Jim Dyer, a Littleton Republican whose district in Arapahoe County could use more water, since the water table has been dropping fast from population growth.

Union Park is a basin in Gunnison County. It sits 10,000 feet above sea level, about 5 miles south of Taylor Park Reservoir and 8 miles east of the Continental Divide.

Exact plans have varied, but the general idea involves one 575-foot-high dam and several smaller saddle dams to hold perhaps 1.2 million acre-feet of water. That would make it the largest reservoir in the state. The current record-holder is Blue Mesa, about 50 miles downstream; its capacity is 829,500 acre-feet.

The site is close to the hydrologic center of Colorado. It would provide storage for the upper Gunnison and, by extension, the upper Colorado basin. One tunnel under the Sawatch Range could put water in the Arkansas River, where Colorado Springs and Aurora could expand their current diversion facilities. It might also be possible to reach the Closed Basin of the San Luis Valley, with facilities for augmenting the Rio Grande's flow.

David Miller of Palmer Lake, who's been touting this project for years (most recently as the Central Colorado Project), points out that since Union Park sits so high, where it would be covered by ice for half the year, evaporative losses would be minimal.

But where's the water going to come from? The creeks of Union Park itself produce only 15,000 acre-feet a year, so the rest would have to come from elsewhere in the Gunnison drainage.

Taylor Park Reservoir is nearby, but water would have to be pumped up to Union Park, and Taylor's water is already committed. That obligation started in 1909, when the new U.S. Bureau of Reclamation completed the 6-mile Gunnison-Uncompahgre Tunnel. It diverts water from the Gunnison River just above the Black Canyon to irrigate 65,000 acres in the Montrose area.

There wasn't always enough water for the Uncompahgre Valley farmers, especially late in the season, so in 1937 the bureau built Taylor Park Reservoir, which could store spring run-off and release it in late summer for irrigation.

The next stop is Blue Mesa Reservoir. There's a problem figuring out just how much Blue Mesa water is available, when there is water (it's at only 48 percent of capacity now). Miller says 240,000 acre-feet. The state water court ruled that it's more like 20,000.

The problem Colorado has after five years of drought isn't storage capacity. There are plenty of

places to store water, if we had it. But the flow of the Colorado River (of which the Gunnison is a major tributary), has been so low that Powell Reservoir is at only 33 percent of capacity.

Powell was built to ensure that the Upper Basin states of the Colorado River (Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico and Utah) could make their deliveries to the Lower Basin (California, Arizona and Nevada). That obligation, about 7.5 million acre-feet a year, comes from the 1922 Colorado River Compact.

But what happens when the Upper Basin states don't have enough water? It falls on the Interior Department to determine who gets how much, and whether the water is stored in Powell, or downstream at Lake Mead behind Hoover Dam.

How much more complicated would this be if Union Park were in place as proposed, taking another 240,000 acre-feet from the Colorado River each year? And where is all that electricity going to come from, to pump water from Blue Mesa to Union Park to South Park to the cities of the plains?

Union Park has been denounced and opposed by everyone from the Gunnison City Council to Gov. Bill Owens. But in Colorado, we seem to have found the secret to eternal life - at least for bad projects, for they never really go away.

Ed Quillen of Salida (ed@cozine.com) is a former newspaper editor whose column appears Tuesday and Sunday.