

THE GOALS OF THE UPPER ARKANSAS WATER CONSERVANCY DISTRICT

BY: Ralph "Terry" Scanga

In 1978, the citizens of the Upper Arkansas Valley formed the Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District. Pressured by water raids from the front range communities and large irrigation wells of the lower Arkansas Valley these individuals forged a dynamic organization with two main goals:

To preserve for all generations the use of available water rights in the Upper Arkansas Valley whether municipal, agricultural, industrial or domestic and to seek every possible means to increase the water supply in the Upper Arkansas Valley.

Today these two goals are still relevant to the Upper Arkansas Valley. Through the effective representation of the district board these twin goals are being accomplished on a daily basis. By legally contesting actions that would have eroded our water rights by downstream users, the district saved this valley in excess of 150,000 annual acre feet of water in the Arkansas River. This is consistent with the district's secondary purpose of supporting the legal administration of water in accordance with historical priority dates.

In order to retain a water right, State Law dictates that a water right owner must be in historical priority and continues to place the water to a beneficial use (municipal, industrial or agricultural). To meet this test the district has maintained a policy of pursuing conversion of agricultural rights no longer in use for other beneficial uses within the district. These uses might be water storage or as needed for industrial, or municipal use. In many cases the district has accomplished this by direct purchase of those rights in jeopardy of loss by the valley.

In 1992, the directors began a significant project to increase the use and accumulation of water in the Upper Arkansas Valley. The project became known as the blanket augmentation plan. This allowed all households, businesses and municipalities affordable access to water. This project achieved a dual purpose allowing the district to transfer into the area's streams and storage vessels hundreds of acre feet of water. This was accomplished primarily through the acquisition of Fryingpan Arkansas Water (water imported from the western slope of Colorado).

In 1997, the United States Geological Survey completed a ten year study of the aquifer commissioned by the Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District. This study concluded that a layer of saturated materials underlies the valley in excess of 1000 feet thick. Additionally this layer has been positively impacted by the importation of water from the western slope and the storage associated with these diversions.

The conclusions are therefore that the blanket augmentation plan has benefited the valleys citizens and simultaneously improved the streams and the aquifer. This discovery has uncovered some important ideas. As a district we can promote the use of wells for municipal use and continue to keep much of the historical irrigation water (surface water)

on the land. By utilizing primarily imported water placed in storage for augmenting well use, the district can feed the streams and provide municipalities much needed augmentation.

Today the goals of the district are the same; keep the water in the valley and place it to a use that benefits all its' citizens.

The Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District offices are located at 122 West Second Street, Salida. Soon a brochure describing the district activities will be available by contacting the District office. The Board meets monthly and all meetings are public.