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Fourth in a series on local water issues provided by the Huerfano County Water Conservancy District

Cucharas River Storage Collaborative

In 2015 the Huerfano County Water Conservancy District (HCWCD) initiated the Cucharas Basin Storage Collaborative to address an acute shortage of water storage capacity in the basin. Roughly 70% of that capacity had been lost through non-use and abandonment of dams after World War II, providing little insurance against drought.

Collaborative Grant Projects

Although in existence for only seven years, the Collaborative has been active and effective. Through a series of grants from the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB), for which matching funds were provided by local governments in the County, the Collaborative has (i) conducted a storage needs assessment for all water users; (ii) established a water budget for the basin; (iii) developed a model to predict the ability of junior water rights to store water in priority; (iv) performed a reconnaissance-level study to identify feasible options for new storage (including field inspection of 58 existing dams); (v) identified five “preferred” storage structures (three enlargements of existing reservoirs and two new reservoirs); (vi) completed feasibility-level design and preliminary geotechnical analyses of those five sites; (vii) completed 50% design for two sites; and (viii) started the funding process for 90% design of one of the selected reservoirs, Bruce Canyon, next to Goemmer Butte. Much of this information is available under Projects on the HCWCD website at <https://www.hcwcd.net/>.

Collaborative Participation

The Collaborative group has included: Cucharas Sanitation and Water District, Town of La Veta, City of Walsenburg, Maria Lakes Grazing Association, HCWCD, and Huerfano County. All have provided local matching funds required for the CWCB grants, as have the La Veta Fire Protection District and the Huerfano County Federal Mineral Lease District. The Colorado Division of Water Resources has provided valuable in-kind assistance. Occasionally participating in the nearly two dozen meetings of the Collaborative have been representatives of the US Forest Service, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado State Forest Service, and private owners of water rights and storage rights.

Cooperation to Maximize Resources

The summer of 2020 saw (1) a decree entered in Water Court Case #2017CW3075, in which the Collaborative adjudicated conditional junior storage rights in the five preferred sites and rights of exchange between them for the placement of water into those storage vessels, and (2) execution of an Intergovernmental Agreement among the Collaborative’s major members setting out the means and methods by which the parties cooperate to utilize water rights, storage structures and exchange potential. The overall goal of the decree and the IGA is to facilitate **integrated operations** between the large water users in the Cucharas River Basin so as to maximize the water resources of the basin. This is done by increasing the amount and volume of storage structures in the basin, increasing mobility and reach of individual water rights

through exchange operations, and increasing availability of water and water options to residents throughout the basin.

Bringing Water Into the County

While the Collaborative is ever alert to oppose plans to export water from the County, it has actively worked to **import water into** the County. Using its decreed exchanges, in 2021 it acquired Pitkin County water from Twin Lakes Reservoir Company, released it down the Arkansas River, exchanged it up the Cucharas River to three reservoirs, then exchanged some of that water back down the Cucharas River and up the Huerfano River to the newly completed Sheep Mountain Reservoir, which is now full and being used to supply replacement water under the HCWCD Regional Augmentation Plan. The maneuver was a long time in the planning but only a few hours in the execution. Its success bodes well for the future of the County.