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Ag group wants study to show cities' water consumption via food

LOVELAND — Colorado's top agriculture official and others expressed support Wednesday for a study that explains how much water is consumed by cities through food consumption.

Colorado Agriculture Commissioner John Salazar and representatives of the Colorado Farm Bureau and other groups said during a Colorado Ag Water Alliance meeting that those numbers would help educate urban populations on the importance of the state's ag industry.

They said increasing awareness and improving communication between agriculture and metro areas is critical to finding ways to prevent more of Colorado's irrigated farms from drying up.

State numbers show municipalities and non-ag industries use only about 7 percent of Colorado's water.

However, Chris Kraft, a Morgan County dairyman who serves as a director for the Western Dairy Association, said those numbers don't factor in the food eaten by municipal residents.

The water used to grow that food for urbanites, Kraft pointed out, is attributed to the agriculture industry, which, according to the state, uses about 85 percent of Colorado's water.

Kraft and others expressed frustration that agriculture often takes heat for using so much more water than municipalities, even though water use in ag later benefits urban populations.

To explain the dependency Colorado's cities have on local farms, Kraft referred to statistics that show 98 percent of all milk consumed in the state is produced only about 50 miles away from the consumer.

In addition to talks of the potential food-water study, the day also featured discussions how cities and the ag industry can lease and share water with one another in the future to maximize use of the resource.

Some attendees agreed that agriculture can find ways to use water more efficiently, but also said urban areas share the responsibility in keeping needed water on farms.

For years, Front Range cities have bought agricultural water to keep up with growth.

Buying ag water is less expensive and easier than building new water projects.

In the past, when farming wasn't profitable, selling water rights to cities gave farmers needed income.

But now, water experts worry that too much agricultural water could be bought up by cities, and food production eventually might not keep up with population growth.

Instead of buying agricultural water to meet their needs, growing cities should grow more responsibly, Salazar said.

Salazar and John Stulp, Gov. John Hickenlooper's policy adviser on water, said during the meeting that if cities grow vertically instead of expanding outward, water savings can amount to as much as 50 to 75 percent.

Having a study that shows how much ag water returns to cities in the form of food might convince urbanites to take such growth measures.

Before the meeting's end, Stulp gave tips to Colorado Ag Water Alliance members on ways of acquiring funds for the study.

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