

WATER

Drought eats into supply

Several factors could create a crisis situation

By CHRIS WOODKA

THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

DENVER — As the drought moves into its third year in the Arkansas River basin, there are concerns about having enough water to meet typical needs.

“We have some real concerns about the availability of water in the Arkansas Valley,” Water Division 2 Engineer Steve Witte told a state forum last week.

Witte spoke as part of a panel of the state’s seven division engineers at the Colorado Water Congress annual convention. Divisions are determined by water basins in Colorado.

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Steve Witte

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The most recent U.S.

Drought Monitor shows the entire Arkansas Valley east of Pueblo is in the worst stage of drought in the nation, and projections offer little hope for relief.

Water supply could be further crippled because snowpack remains below average. This means less water than normal will be coming from the Colorado River basin through transmountain diversions.

Compounding the problem are:

- The winter water storage program, which allows farmers to use water at optimum points in the growing season, is at its lowest point in 25 years.
- Less water is available for lease by farmers.

The Pueblo Board of Water Works and Colorado Springs plan to rebuild storage supplies this year.

- There is more demand for Fryingpan-Arkansas Project return flows, even though less water is available. Ironically, Colorado has a 57,600 acre-foot surplus in delivery of water to Kansas under the Arkansas River Compact.

"It was so dry this year that Kansas did not take any deliveries from John Martin Reservoir," Witte said. The surplus is recorded on a 10-year average, and Colorado is planning on slowly adjusting the formula to determine presumptive depletions from well pumping.

Witte said one bright spot is that less water for replacement by farmers is needed under surface irrigation rules designed to hold consumptive use in check. If farmers can find the water.

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