ARKANSAS RIVER

Moving target
State finding it hard to keep everyone happy in a drought

By CHRIS WOODKA
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

SALIDA — A farmer might measure his ability to irrigate by picking a flat rock in the middle of the river and deciding there’s enough water to open the headgate.

The state takes a different view.

"It’s like a three-dimensional Chinese checkers board that spins on an axis, and the marbles keep changing colors and sometimes disappear. And then you have to make your play under a stopwatch," Water Division 2 Engineer Steve Witte told the Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District Thursday.

Witte was invited to the meeting to address the concerns of Upper Arkansas ditch users that their senior water rights are being curtailed for more junior calls downstream.

The district also is concerned that the river is being managed in a way that would allow Colorado Springs or Aurora to exchange out of priority at the expense of upstream ditches.

Witte said that’s not the case.

"We have been splitting calls more frequently than in the past because we’re trying to do a better job," Witte said.

The river call is set each morning by the water commissioner in La Junta, Lonnie Spady, based on conditions. Most of the large canals in the Arkansas River basin are clustered in Pueblo-Otero counties.

However, conditions along the river can change quickly if isolated thunderstorms hit a particular drainage.

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In a normal year, that doesn’t matter as much, but the effects show up more profoundly in a drought, particularly in the Upper Arkansas, where there are fewer water rights that predate the most significant water rights in the Lower Arkansas Valley, Witte said.

This year, the call most often has been split between two or three reaches of the river in order to reflect varying conditions, Witte said.

The superintendents of four large canal companies in the Lower Arkansas River basin showed up and supported Spady’s decisions in this difficult year.

“This is the worst year we’ve ever had," said Manny Torrez, superintendent of the Fort Lyon Canal.

“We’ve been out of water for the last 90-110 days.”

Fort Lyon saw some water a few weeks ago after a localized thunderstorm in the Rocky Ford area, an example of the type of
situation creating a split call.

cwoodka@chieftain.com