WATER

Aurora hunting for leases in Ark Valley

Super Ditch not certain if it can meet the demand

By CHRIS WOODKA

THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Aurora wants to lease additional water from the Arkansas River basin in 2013 and is prepared to spend $5 million.

The city’s storage has been drawn down to 53 percent of capacity, triggering a situation where it can lease water under the terms of a 2003 agreement with the Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy District.

Aurora Water sent a letter to the Arkansas Valley Super Ditch last month offering to lease 10,000 acre-feet of water for $500 per acre-foot, or $5 million total. The terms are part of an agreement Aurora made with the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District in 2010.

That may not be enough, said Super Ditch President John Schweizer. If commodity prices stay high, farmers would be able to get about $1,200 per acre for corn and $1,500 per acre for alfalfa, minus costs for cultivating, planting, irrigation and harvesting.

“We’ve got to see if there are farmers interested in doing it,” Schweizer said. “If the price per acre is right, I think you could see some interest.”

Schweizer expects opposition to the transfer. This year, a Super Ditch pilot program met unprecedented resistance from other water users after it was submitted to the state engineer.

“A lot depends on the severity of the drought and how people in cities might be affected,” he said.

While the Super Ditch conceptually includes seven large irrigation ditch systems east of Pueblo, farms on the High Line and Catlin canals could fill the Aurora order, Schweizer said.

Both canal companies already have had annual meetings, so the leases would be filled through negotiations with the boards of each canal and interested shareholders.

Bylaws on both canals have been changed to allow for temporary water transfers, and the High Line Canal leased water to Aurora and Colorado Springs in 2004-05.

Aurora is waiting to hear if the Super Ditch can fill the order and does not have a backup plan, said Greg Baker, Aurora Water spokesman.

cwoodka@chieftain.com