WATER LEASES

Ditch boards OK lease to Aurora

Super Ditch, Catlin, Highline reach agreement

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Two Rocky Ford-area ditch company boards agreed Tuesday to work with the Arkansas Valley Super Ditch to lease water to Aurora next year.

The boards of the High Line and Catlin canals cleared the way for the leases, which will be made through the Super Ditch.

"It's a voluntary program, and shareholders can either agree to participate or not to participate," said John Schweizer, president of both the Catlin Canal and Super Ditch boards. "How many choose to participate determines how much each person will get."

Aurora has offered to buy up to 10,000 acre-feet of water from the Super Ditch next year because its reservoir storage is below 60 percent of available capacity. That is a trigger for leasing in drought-recovery years under the 2003 agreement with the Southeastern Colorado and Upper Arkansas water conservancy districts. Aurora initially offered $500 per acre-foot, but that figure is under negotiation, Schweizer said.

"The boards agreed that wouldn't work at all," Schweizer said.

Super Ditch attorney Peter Nichols will negotiate the rate with Aurora.

The $500 per acre-foot figure was part of an agreement reached in 2010 with the Super Ditch and the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District. Since then, the price of corn and hay — the major crops grown here — in the Arkansas Valley has nearly tripled during the drought.

"That was a different time," Schweizer said.

Either an interruptible supply plan or substitute water supply plan would have to be filed with the Division of Water Resources for the lease to occur. That would require engineering and legal resources to meet a possible challenge from other water users in the valley.

Schweizer said those costs also will be negotiated with Aurora.

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