AURORA LEASES

Water deal must satisfy agreements

By CHRIS WOODKA

THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Agreements with three conservancy districts determine whether Aurora can lease additional water from the Arkansas River basin.

Aurora purchased nearly all of the Rocky Ford Ditch in Otero County, part of the Colorado Canal in Crowley County and several ranches in Lake County in the 1980s and 1990s to meet water needs of the city of 300,000 east of Denver.

In 2004-05, it leased water from the High Line Canal, which irrigates farms in the Rocky Ford area, as the city recovered from the 2002 drought.

Next year, Aurora is bracing for another drought recovery to bolster its storage levels.

Under 2003 agreements with the Southeastern district and the Upper Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District, Aurora may lease additional water when its storage levels drop below 60 percent of total capacity on March 15. It can lease water for up to three out of 10 years under those circumstances.

Aurora has drawn down Homestake Reservoir, which it shares with Colorado Springs, for dam repairs. Aurora stores water in 10 other reservoirs.

Including Homestake, Aurora is at 53 percent capacity, but even without Homestake factored in, capacity already is at just 61 percent. Last month, the Aurora City Council authorized its water utility to begin looking for leases.

“We're looking at the agreement to determine if we have any issues with the leases,” said Jim Broderick, executive director of the Southeastern district.

Under its 2010 agreement with the Lower Ark District, Aurora is obligated to work with the Super Ditch before looking elsewhere for water in the Arkansas Valley.

“It's a step in the right direction,” said Jay Winner, general manager of the Lower Ark district. “The Super Ditch will build collaboration and cooperation among the ditch companies.”

Aurora also has an agreement with the High Line Canal board for future leases.

Arkansas Valley water is exchanged upstream to Twin Lakes, where it moves to Aurora through the Otero Pumping Station and Homestake pipeline. cwoodka@chieftain.com