SUPER DITCH

Upping the ante

Farmers want to put water leasing on a per-acre basis

By CHRIS WOODKA

THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Farmers want a higher price if a lease with Aurora goes through this year.

The boards of the High Line and Catlin canals met with the Arkansas Valley Super Ditch Thursday evening and agreed to a base price of $1,070 per acre for leasing water. The price could increase if the yield of water is greater. “It puts the risk for delivery on the cities,” Super Ditch President John Schweizer said of the pricing strategy.

In traditional water deals, the price has been been set per acre-foot.

Aurora, under a 2010 agreement with the Super Ditch, offered $500 per acre-foot to lease up to 10,000 acrefeet of water this year. Its storage has dropped below 60 percent, which triggers the city’s ability to lease more water from the Arkansas River basin under its 2003 agreement with the Southeastern Colorado and Upper Arkansas water conservancy districts.

But commodity prices for hay and corn — the primary crops grown in the Arkansas Valley — have increased since 2010. In addition, a prolonged drought has reduced water supply for the farmers.

To provide water, farmers must dry up crop land.

“When you’re drying up the land, the yield depends on the type of water year,” Schweizer said. Because of differences in water rights, the yield per acre varies from ditch to ditch as well. The base price reflects crop values, but if the water yield per acre increases, so will the lease price, Schweizer said.

The Super Ditch board has agreed to cap land fallowing at 30-35 percent per farm.

“That keeps it evenly distributed,” Schweizer said. “When we get into the leasing mode, it will help keep the land in the valley in production.”

If the Aurora lease goes through, the Super Ditch hopes to have a substitute water supply plan in place by May. A pilot program to lease water in 2012 failed because of delays in getting a state-approved plan in place prior to the irrigation season.

cwoodka@chieftain.com