SUPER DITCH

‘We’re still unified’

Farmers want a better rate for water in possible Aurora lease

By CHRIS WOODKA

THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Negotiations will proceed between the Arkansas Valley Super Ditch and Aurora for a proposed lease of water this year.

“We’re still unified and this is a big step forward,” said Super Ditch President John Schweizer. “The whole idea of the Super Ditch is to begin to get the ditches working together.”

The Super Ditch board, which includes some shareholders from seven Arkansas Valley ditches, met Wednesday with the boards of the High Line and Catlin canals in Rocky Ford.

Aurora has proposed leasing up to 10,000 acre-feet of water from Super Ditch under the terms of a 2010 agreement at a rate of $500 per acre-foot delivered to Lake Pueblo.

The boards of both ditch companies, as well as the Super Ditch board, say the rate is too low.

“Commodity prices are different than when we made the agreement,” Schweizer said. The Super Ditch board instructed attorney Peter Nichols to negotiate with Aurora on the rate, as well as engineering costs and other details. Aurora has not officially changed its position. “We negotiated the price in the term sheet and we expect them to stand by it,” said Gerry Knapp, manager of Aurora’s Arkansas Valley operations. “We’re always willing to talk to them.”

The water would be generated by drying up some of the irrigated farm ground on the High Line and Catlin canals for one year. Aurora has a contract with the Bureau of Reclamation to store water in Lake Pueblo and move it through a paper trade to Twin Lakes, where it is pumped through the Otero Pumping Station and Homestake pipeline into the South Platte River basin.

The boards do not expect all shareholders on the two ditches to participate. About 25 to 30 percent of the ground of any participating shareholder could be dried up, Schweizer said.

No one is certain that the Arkansas Valley will snap out of its two-year drought in 2013, so deliveries could fall short, as they did when Aurora leased water from the High Line Canal in 2004-05. Aurora owns water rights in Otero, Crowley and Lake counties, and in dry years water deliveries from those rights fall well below average.

Under 2003 agreements with the Southeastern Colorado and Upper Arkansas water conservancy districts, Aurora may lease additional water when its systemwide reservoir storage falls below 60 percent. Current storage is at 51 percent, and dropping by 1 percent weekly.

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