

Efforts are being made to protect farms

Irrigation water disappears

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Agriculture's significant multi-million dollar contribution to Pueblo County's economy is the focus of a new economic impact study that could guide the future demise of farmlands along the Bessemer Ditch, hopefully, without a huge economic hit to vibrant farming communities.

When the Pueblo Board of Water Works purchased one-third of the Bessemer Ditch irrigated farmland water rights in 2009 from local farmers, it was looking to accommodate future growth in Pueblo. The purchase set in motion what will be the removal of irrigation water from more than 5,000 acres of farmland in the St. Charles Mesa, Vineland and Avondale areas.

A new study "The Economic Impact of Dry-Up on Colorado's Bessemer Ditch," assesses—and proposes approaches to mitigate—the dry up of that farmland which contributes between \$8.4 million to \$17 million to Pueblo County's economy each year. The report was prepared on behalf of the Palmer Land Conservancy which is leading the Bessemer Farmland Conservation Project effort—with many partners—to ensure a vital future for Pueblo County's farmland.

"Eastern Pueblo County landowners got together and started the dialogue to figure out what they could do in light of this situation. Those landowners and the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union began the conversation and we have since really championed that effort because agriculture has a significant contribution to the economy," said Dillon O'Hare, Pueblo community conservation manager for the Palmer Land Trust.

"We now know when water is taken off the farmland what is that impact and we can look at other options. The

report "gives a robust set of alternatives to paint a really clear picture for the decision makers."

Those decision makers include landowners, Pueblo Water, the Bessemer Irrigation Ditch Company and the Pueblo County Commissioners; all of whom have interests at stake in the dry-out of farmlands.

Several options to protect farming are being explored

Options that are explored in the plan range from switching which farmlands are dried out to avoid loss of the most fertile and productive farmlands to rethinking the types of crops that are grown to yield a higher dollar return.

"I think that is a great plan for when Pueblo takes the water and uses it," said Jim Hanratty, who farms and ranches on 40 acres of land in Vineland which his parents purchased when he was in elementary school.

Hanratty's main business is cattle, but he also grows forage crops like alfalfa and corn and sells hay. This year his son Jay grew pumpkins on 20 acres of farmland.

Hanratty said farming isn't easy and "has been a challenge." The Hanratty's

no longer grow chile for wholesalers because "the last few years the labor issues have made it so difficult," he said.

To help gauge whether the water rights can be moved along the ditch, a pilot water transfer will be executed to determine if it can work, what the steps are and what the costs are.

"In that process, the ditch company is going to have to approve the water transfer to make sure it is physically possible based on the hydraulics of the ditch system. Pueblo Water is going to have to approve the transfer and then ultimately the 1041 (planning) process (at the Pueblo County Commission level) will dictate a lot of what happens after water starts to get moved off farms," O'Hare said.

If it seems like a complicated process, it is.

Hanratty has one particular farm plot that would be a candidate for the dry-out because it "has less desirable soil, and this water could be utilized in a lot more practical fashion."

"The problem that I see—as in any business venture—is getting two separate parties to work together on it," when it's time for water rights transfers, he said. "I don't know that people really know about this or will care until the water is gone."

He admits that the farmland he owns is something he may look at differently than farmers who have had the asset in their families for many years.

A cooperative effort is being made

O'Hare said the most encouraging part of the project is there are no "bad guys" in the buyout scenario. In this case, the players are working as partners and not enemies.

"What we have here is the Pueblo Board of Water Works has purchased one-third of the water rights, but they are securing Pueblo's water future in an increasingly water scare environment. Pueblo is going to be in a really good place for water," O'Hare said.

"More importantly, another municipality would have purchased the water, but there is not a municipality on the Front Range that cares about those communities as much as Pueblo does, so Pueblo Water is in a sense, protecting the resources in our own backyard, so it is not an adversarial relationship."

A water court decree sets the stage to allow for the transfer. Once a plan is settled on, funds will have to be raised to execute the plan.

It will be a number of years down the road and funding likely will come from a number of sources, O'Hare said.

Right now, Pueblo is leasing the water rights back to farmers until 2029, and in some cases 2039.

"So that has given us this grace period to find out how to move the water and be strategic so the community stays whole. If you drive out in the county, it is

business as usual, nothing has changed—but we know change is coming and in a sense, it is this big tidal wave coming," O'Hare said.

"The water is going to be moved off farms. If we are not doing our work now, we are going to experience some devastating effects," he explained.

Hanratty agrees that farming is vital in the county and the loss of irrigation water could discourage future farmers from getting into the profession.

"It was hard for me to get started and I would find it nearly impossible to do that today," Hanratty said.

Although it is an extremely long-term project, the Colorado-Springs based Palmer Land Conservancy is known for being in it for the long haul. It pays for long term conservancy leases of lands in 19 Southeastern Colorado counties to prevent them from being developed.

"We help protect the land forever. When we work with land owners and communities, our work is in perpetuity," O'Hare said.

Because the project is so important, it is a big part of the conservancy's operations and budget, so O'Hare has been set up with a downtown office to oversee the project from Pueblo.

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