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W. Slope water deal surfaces Plan hashed out with Denver Water embraces partnership with statewide benefits

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Bruce Finley The Denver Post

Denver is proposing a deal with Western Slope communities to try to allay concerns about increased diversion of water to sustain Front Range growth.

The emerging deal would obligate Denver Water to:

Leave sufficient water in Dillon Reservoir for recreation in Summit County.

Share and re-use mountain water within the Denver metro area.

Limit future diversions of water by metro-area suburbs from the Western Slope.

Contribute about \$22 million for water plants and to maintain mountain ecosystems.

Negotiation of the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement has been done in closed session over several years by water-district officials, utility executives and staffers, and their lawyers in Western Slope towns and around the metro area. The parties pursued it after years of litigation.

Denver and Western Slope authorities are expected to reveal some details of their negotiations next week. News that an agreement was near was first reported by the Mountain Town News, an online newspaper covering environmental and economic news in resort communities.

The rough agreement - more than 50 pages - has surfaced as Denver Water's Moffat Tunnel plan to divert more Colorado River water from west of the Continental Divide to an expanded Gross Reservoir west of Boulder is under environmental review.

The Northern Water Conservancy District, which also is proposing a new diversion project for Front Range suburbs, apparently is not part of the new deal.

"The proposed agreement establishes a new approach to managing water in Colorado," Denver Water manager Jim Lochhead, a former director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, said in a statement. "It embraces a partnership to manage water for the benefit of the state as a whole.

"It would provide Denver Water the operational flexibility necessary to manage our system and develop additional water resources in the face of drought and climate change and also would provide a number of enhancements to the environment, water supply and water quality on the

West Slope."

Denver Water also would commit to sharing water it diverts with south-metro suburbs. To participate in a separate water-sharing deal with Denver, those communities would have to agree not to seek future diversions from western Colorado.

South-metro water authorities did not participate in negotiations and could not be reached late Friday.

The most important parts of the deal are "that it looks at the Colorado River Basin from the headwaters to the state line as a whole," said Colorado River District general manager Eric Kuhn, who represented Western Slope communities. "It looks to future solutions rather than past problems."

Environmental advocates are responding favorably - albeit with reservations.

"The deal's great, innovative, the way of the future," said Drew Peternell, director of Trout Unlimited's Colorado Water Project. "But it doesn't deal with the impacts of Denver's Moffat Tunnel project. We want to make sure the stream-flow impacts of that project are fully mitigated. If it is permitted, that project should not be allowed to damage fisheries."

Historic agreements require enough water to flow downstream in the Colorado River to serve California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah. Federal data show that the average annual amount of water diverted by all states from the Colorado River, about 15.4 million acre-

feet, has surpassed the average annual amount of water that flows in the river, about 14.5 million acre-feet.

Colorado's proposed agreement "shows the way for how to make peace within the state and also how to make peace within the whole basin," said Melinda Kassen, an environmental consultant and member of Colorado's Interbasin Compact Committee.

"It's a great first step."