



EDCC'S DRIVE | LEAD | SUCCEED
Thought Leadership Series

*Is the Ongoing Water Crisis an
Economic Development Issue?*



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VIRTUAL SERIES
Economic Development Council of Colorado



Economic Development Council of Colorado

Thought Leadership Series

OUR HISTORY

Established in 1976, the Economic Development Council of Colorado (EDCC) promotes effective, responsible economic development practices across Colorado. Today we are the state's premier economic development resource, representing the economic development interests of both the private and public sectors throughout the state. We connect our communities, our members and our partners to high-quality educational opportunities and trusted resources, and advocate for sound policies and programs that support a vibrant economy and enhance quality of life for all Coloradans.

EDCC members come from a variety of settings. We are rural and urban, public and private-sector, for profit and not-for-profit, and include individual communities, counties and regional organizations, local and state governments, chambers of commerce, universities, and private industry. We are economic development professionals, community volunteers, and business and political leaders.

OUR VISION

To be recognized as Colorado's most trusted resource for economic development stakeholders committed to promoting a vibrant Colorado economy.

OUR MISSION

To promote effective, responsible economic development by connecting Colorado's economic development stakeholders to high-quality educational opportunities and trusted resources and advocating for sound policies and programs that support a vibrant economy and enhance quality of life for all Coloradans.

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Is the Ongoing Water Crisis an Economic Development Issue?

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Executive Summary

IS THE ONGOING WATER CRISIS AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ISSUE?

Colorado doesn't have a water shortage problem; it has a water management problem...

Colorado, known as The Headwaters State, is blessed with a remarkable network of rivers. With a staggering count of 156 named rivers originating in its headwater regions, Colorado stands out as a haven for abundant water resources. Among these rivers, seventeen extend over a vast expanse of more than 10,000 square kilometers, showcasing the grandeur and diversity of Colorado's waterways.

Despite this abundance, Colorado faces a pressing issue that goes beyond simple water scarcity. It is not a water shortage problem that plagues the state, but rather a water management problem. The consequences of continued warming, poor snowpack, and low river flows have been nothing short of catastrophic, leaving a devastating impact on the availability of water supplies for our farmers, ranchers, cities, towns, and industries.

The ramifications of this water crisis are far-reaching, affecting not only the livelihoods of individuals but also the very foundation of Colorado's economic landscape. The ability to retain a strong industry base, construct attainable homes, and cultivate enough food to support its labor shed all hang in the balance. It is evident that water is not just a resource to be taken for granted; it is a critical factor in driving economic development.

Colorado's Economic Development community finds itself at a crossroads, compelled to face this unprecedented threat head-on. The urgency to find sustainable solutions and implement effective water management strategies has never been greater. Only by addressing this challenge with determination and innovation can we hope to safeguard Colorado's future prosperity.

Let us join forces, as both individuals and businesses, to support the efforts of Colorado's Economic Development community in tackling this pressing issue. Together, we can contribute to the preservation of our precious water resources, ensuring a thriving economy and a sustainable future for all.

AGRICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

– Travis Smith, Western Water Specialist, National Wild Turkey Foundation

Will there be enough water for Colorado's present and future needs?
Can water be the one issue that brings us together?

Is the infamous quote, "Whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting!" still accurate in 2023?
Colorado's water and water future are far too valuable to continue fighting over!

Water supplies for Colorado's increasing population, growing recreation economy,
environmental goals... will it all just come from agriculture?

Is it just easier to continue the process Colorado has practiced over the last 150 years of
transferring agriculture water rights to municipal use?

Is Colorado ready to consider what we want our state to look like in ten? Twenty? Thirty
years?

Does Colorado have the courage and leadership to seriously have the hard conversation
regarding our economic future that is linked directly to future water supplies?

How does Colorado prepare for the future with all of the uncertainty of continued drought
and increasing demand for a decreasing water supply?

How do we balance the increasing water demand for municipal, environmental, and
recreational needs?

Unless we clearly understand how Colorado's water development originated and has adapted
since 1876, and have an appreciation of Colorado's rich water history, the Prior Appropriation
System and the role of agriculture, it is easy to answer the questions listed above.

Colorado's history is written in water! Colorado history is a great story of water development.
The arid west, beyond the 100th Meridian, requires developed water for agriculture and
municipal use. Our great cities of today were developed by acquiring agricultural water rights,
both ground water and surface water. Agriculture has appropriated and put to beneficial use
Colorado's water resources since the 1860s. Agriculture has provided for the economic
development of Colorado through food production and growing rural and urban economies.
As Colorado has transitioned from a mostly rural population to a larger urban population,
agriculture is still a major economic driver. Agriculture still owns 85% of Colorado's water
resources. Agriculture – farmers and ranchers – are still putting that water to beneficial use
growing crops, raising livestock, creating wildlife habitat, generating return flows, and
contributing to rural and urban economies across the State. Agriculture water use also

provides for green open spaces and view-scapes for urban dwellers to escape from the concrete and steel of the urban environment.

Colorado is now moving from the water development era to the water management/water allocation era! The days of looking for new water supplies, surface water or ground water, have passed. The concept of just appropriating unappropriated water for new consumptive uses will not meet our future needs! The idea of just looking over the hill into the next basin or upstream for new water supplies to continue urban development is no longer socially acceptable. The Colorado Water Plan, 2015 and 2022 editions, places a high value and social importance on Colorado's agriculture community. The urban/rural divide is increasing with each new person arriving in Colorado. The Colorado Water Plan recognizes all sectors of Colorado's economy and emphasizes Colorado's water is too important to pick winners and losers.

Rural agricultural traditions are being stressed and are under-represented as population increases in the urban centers. There is increased pressure and stress on Colorado's Ag water right owners from the environmental and recreational interests as new legislation aims to take water from Ag water rights for environmental and recreational flows. As agriculture-to-municipal transfers continue in Colorado there is always the threat to rural areas in the form of water export schemes. An example is Renewable Water Resources' plan to extract ground water from the northern San Luis Valley for further urban growth and economic opportunities in Douglas County.

Colorado has an opportunity to address its water supply future by raising the public awareness of its decision makers; members of the legislature, county commissioners, planning and zoning commissions among a few. Current talking points regarding Colorado's agriculture are:

- Sustainable agriculture – food security, crop efficiencies, irrigation efficiencies
- Sustainable water development – water security
- Sustainable economic development – job security
- Smart water development – diversion efficiencies
- Developing crops that are less water dependent – never mind if there is not an available market

Are these suggesting that everything done in the past has been wrong? Have we had less than smart water policies in the past? Are these Smart water concepts encouraged so agriculture will use less water, and then more water will be available for municipal use? Does Ag need to use less so urban areas can continue to sprawl?

Rural agricultural water users want and need to be included and recognized in the conversation and policy making. There is so much that divides us – rural values and urban values - politics, economics, world views, liberal, conservative; the importance of water could be the great unifier in Colorado. Water is the one common element that we can all agree on. The difference may be: How to use the water? What is the greatest use of our water resources? The challenge will be: Are we willing to listen and learn from each other, or just talk over each other?

The agricultural community who owns most of the water rights in Colorado desires a bright future just as the urban community does. Water rights in Colorado are still a private property right. Will we simply change the rules through legislation driven by urban interests to make certain urban areas have a sustainable water supply? The water crisis we see on the Colorado River system, the South Platte, the Arkansas, the Rio Grande, San Juan and Delores will continue in the future. The challenges are to recognize that there are no new water supplies to be developed, that we need to manage a limited resource, and learning to live within our means. Understanding the important role agriculture has played in the past and its important role in the future, I invite you to check out [Colorado's Water Plan](#) on the [Colorado Water Conservation](#) website. Consider participating in your [Basin Roundtable](#) to learn more about the opportunities to plan the water future for all Colorado citizens.

“Whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting!” Colorado’s water is too valuable for us to continue fighting over. Colorado’s available water for all of our future needs is dependent upon our collective understanding of how we got to this place in time and how we want Colorado to look in the future.

DO WE REALLY WANT IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE IN COLORADO?

– Michael Bartolo, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist Emeritus, Colorado State University, and Arkansas Valley Farmer

Colorado has one of the most robust and impactful agricultural industries in the country. Farmers and ranchers contribute an impressive \$47 billion to the state’s overall economy [1].

The scope of Colorado agriculture is immense, encompassing the multi-faceted livestock industry, agronomic staples like alfalfa, corn and wheat, and the production of iconic specialty crops like Pueblo Chile, Rocky Ford melons, Olathe sweet corn and Palisade peaches. Colorado’s high elevation and incidence of solar radiation, along with large variations in diurnal temperature (warm days and cool nights), lead to the accumulation of unique flavor attributes in crops and, as we are just discovering, the synthesis of compounds that have a direct beneficial effect on human health.

Throughout Colorado’s history, agriculture has not only provided citizens with sustenance but has also been integral to the state’s culture and quality of life. As we look to the future, agriculture is one of the few industries that we know, with certainty, will remain in demand. It can feed us at a local level; we just had a glimpse of that during the supply-chain disruptions during the pandemic. In addition, agriculture has the capacity to help us address one of the most existential issues we face as humans, global warming. It has a substantial ability to

[1] <https://cwcb.colorado.gov/colorado-water-plan>

sequester atmospheric carbon. There is little doubt, agriculture is the one Colorado industry that is vital to our health and survival, seasonally adaptable, and environmentally sustainable. Colorado's agriculture industry evolved to where it is today based on its ability to best use and steward existing natural resources and manage the risks associated with weather and markets. Livestock, for example, are used to sustainably harvest the energy collected by native vegetation on our nonarable grasslands and mountain meadows. Other areas are especially productive for agriculture due to the fertile alluvial soils which were deposited over millennia in our river valleys and the requisite adjacency to water. Clearly, in these irrigated portions of the state, water is the defining natural resource.

In Colorado, agriculture accounts for approximately 86% of the water consumed in the state (2). That statistic, in a sense, disconnects us from the true reality of water usage. That is, in fact, 86% of the state's water is used by those of us who eat. Inescapably, it takes water to grow plants and plants are the critical link that enables us as humans to capture the sun's energy. Under a typical Colorado environment, it takes approximately 24 acre-inches (about 650,000 gallons) of water per year to grow one acre of a crop like corn (think of a football field covered with 2 feet of water). In comparison, that same amount of water will be able to a service about 4 or 5 residential households annually [2].

Amidst both natural and man-made disruptions in water supply, agriculture is keenly aware that collectively we will live in a world of less water. Forged by its resiliency over time, however, agriculture has an immense capacity to adjust to changing environmental conditions. Agricultural producers instinctively know that they are always accountable to Mother Nature and are constantly aware of the fickle relationship they have with her. They also know that they will not expand their footprint as far as land use and water supply is concerned. They are doing their part. Accordingly, producers are always looking at ways to conserve water.

Farmers are at the forefront of developing and adopting water conserving technologies. Methods like drip irrigation, where water is applied directly to the root zone via small diameter tubing, significantly reduces evaporation from the soil surface and water consumption. Similarly, advanced sprinkler systems efficiently irrigate crops based on feedback from environmental sensors placed throughout the field or drone and satellite-based imagery. Reduced tillage methods use crop residues to prevent evaporative losses from the soil surface and at the same time help sequester carbon in the soil. Advancements in crop genetics are developing rapidly and enable crop yields to be sustained with less water. These are just a few of the established and emerging production methods that will continue to advance the science of water conservation.

In addition to these on-farm water saving methodologies, there are incredible opportunities for agriculture to work synergistically with municipalities to buffer municipal water supplies. Temporary leases, water banking, and farm-municipal partnerships to fund on-farm water-

[2] <https://waterknowledge.colostate.edu/water-management-administration/water-uses/>

saving technologies provide promising alternatives to meet shortfalls in water supplies. Many of these strategies, along with conservation easements, can help agricultural water owners capture the full market value of their property without compromising the long-term sustainability of their land and water. Given the complexities of Colorado water laws and interstate compacts, it is clear that there are significant logistic and legal issues to overcome to bring all these strategies to fruition. Nonetheless, a pathway does exist to move forward in fair and mutually beneficial ways.

Perhaps one of the of the most encouraging and significant sources of optimism lies in the sentiment of the citizens of Colorado themselves. An incredible 98% of Coloradoans agree that the presence of ranches, farms, and agriculture are important to our quality of life in Colorado, and it is important to maintain land and water in agriculture (3). They recognize the importance of agriculture as the source of food, open space, and a major contributor to our collective values.

Yet, despite all this potential and the support of a huge majority of Coloradoans, the beat of unbridled growth and development continues to wreak havoc on our state's agricultural lands both directly via sprawl and indirectly via water transfers. Municipalities and investment groups continue the buy and dry legacy perpetrated by front range municipalities in the past. The classic example was painfully demonstrated in Crowley County: an economic, cultural, and environmental atrocity that when viewed through the lens of time, might be considered one of the worst travesties in Colorado history.

The current iterations of buy and dry are veiled in the erred assumption that those transfers are somehow more sensitive this time around and thus bereft from any moral responsibility. An additional justification often employed by those same water interests is that these transactions are simply "righteous and noble efforts to supply water to the citizens of our community." Given that 98% of Coloradoans don't want to see water leave agriculture and 90% want a future with the less growth (and the majority of those would like to see population growth totally stop or even decline) (4), it makes one wonder: Who are these citizens that municipalities are serving? How disconnected are we?

Certainly, in the short term, say within the 2050 horizon of the Colorado Water Plan, we have some promising opportunities to meet water uncertainties and shortfalls. Ultimately, besides obliterating an incredible resource, feeding urban sprawl by taking agricultural water from one part of the state for use in another part doesn't solve any problem. It only postpones the inevitable.

The fact is, Mother Nature doesn't operate in the short term. Mother Nature is not constrained by time or remotely concerned about job growth statistics, interstate compacts, water court

[3] <https://ag.colorado.gov/markets/publications/public-attitudes-survey-2022>

[4] https://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/july_2022/colorado_voters_worry_state_becoming_too_crowded

stipulations, or the metrics of economic development. Ultimately, she will have the last word. Given that, we as a state must fully embrace the most fundamental principal that our insatiable quest for perpetual growth and economic development is not sustainable in a world of finite or perhaps diminishing resources. Until then, we will continue on the path that not only leaves us with less agriculture but also a lower quality of life for the unfortunate generations that follow us.

A MUNICIPAL PERSPECTIVE

– Emily Hunt, Deputy Infrastructure Director, City of Thornton

Municipal Water Supplies

As a water provider, Thornton has a responsibility to provide its customers with a sufficient and safe water supply to meet their needs every day of every year, through periods of drought and abundance, today and into the future. In order to accomplish this task, Thornton must acquire sufficient water supplies and construct infrastructure to ensure delivery at the right time and in the right amount to meet the needs of its water customers. In Colorado, water is limited in quantity, quality, and by location; water shortages are common. Large water providers like Thornton develop robust water systems using multiple high-quality water sources, different types and priorities of water, and maintain adequate storage, distribution, and treatment infrastructure in order to ensure continuous service.

Clear Creek and South Platte Supplies Development

When the first Thornton neighborhoods were constructed in 1953, the developer requested, but was denied, water service from the Denver Board of Water Commissioners (now known as Denver Water). Thornton incorporated as a city and began purchasing water in ditch companies that divert from Clear Creek and the South Platte River. These highly valued water rights with senior priorities became the backbone of the city's current water supply system. As Thornton grew, it continued buying Clear Creek and South Platte ditch shares to enhance its water supply system by varying the types of water rights it acquired, developing new junior water rights, and adding storage reservoirs.

Two Forks Reservoir

In the early 1980s, Thornton was a participant in a metro area-wide water project called the Two Forks Reservoir Project. However, as the environmental and permitting issues started to mount (Two Forks was ultimately vetoed by the EPA), Thornton began looking elsewhere to

meet its long-term water supply needs. The city analyzed expanding its holdings in the Clear Creek and South Platte systems, as well as other possible sources along the Front Range. Clear Creek supplies were limited; the South Platte system had potential for additional supplies, but competition was increasing, as was the price. A bigger concern was that the South Platte system water quality was poor, as the system diverted from the South Platte River below a number of major wastewater treatment plants, and below the urban runoff from the Denver metro area.

The Thornton Northern Project

After investigating numerous possible future water supply systems, in 1985 and 1986 Thornton purchased approximately 20,000 acres of farm land in Larimer and Weld counties and water shares from the Water Supply and Storage Company used to irrigate the farms. Thornton chose this water supply for a number of reasons, the most important of which was the high quality of the water source. After over ten years in Water Court, including a trip to the Colorado Supreme Court, Thornton successfully obtained Colorado Water Court approval that changed the water rights from agricultural uses to municipal uses on March 9, 1998.

Agricultural Stewardship

Thornton still owns over 18,500 acres of the land it purchased in the 1980s. The city has an Agricultural Stewardship Office in Ault, Colorado that is staffed by three employees who manage Thornton's properties and agricultural programs. The Thornton Northern Project Water Court Decree imposed requirements that prior to municipal conversion of the water rights, Thornton must establish one or more of the following: revegetate the formerly irrigated land with native grasses or other suitable self-sustaining ground cover, dryland farming, or suitable non-agricultural uses. Currently, about one-third of the acreage has been converted to dry-land grasses under Thornton's revegetation program; the remaining two-thirds is still in irrigation and is leased to local farmers. The water that was used on the now-revegetated properties will be the first water Thornton uses for municipal purposes once the Thornton Water Project pipeline is completed. The remaining land will stay in irrigation until Thornton needs additional water supplies for its growth. It's anticipated that the remaining lands will transition to Thornton's revegetation program incrementally over the next forty years.

Thornton's Northern Properties Stewardship Plan

Thornton's Northern Properties Stewardship Plan (NPSP) is a voluntary, community-driven effort that began in 2018 to develop a vision for the management and future land use of the land owned by Thornton in Weld and Larimer Counties. Thornton aims to be a partner and good neighbor to the people and communities impacted by the city's water transfer, especially those who live and work near Thornton's properties. The NPSP is informed by the communities' long-term plans; the economic and social interests of regional and local stakeholders; and youth and young-farmer engagement. It will also be informed by data-

driven analysis of land use, productivity, quality, and value. The NPSP will combine community interests and land analysis findings to develop a vision for the management of Thornton's properties between 2025 and 2065. The NPSP is being completed with the guidance of a steering committee of approximately twenty-five local subject matter experts, community members, agricultural representatives, and other stakeholders, and is funded by Thornton, the Colorado Water Conservation Board, the Bureau of Reclamation WaterSMART program, and DOLA. The planning process is expected to be completed and documented by late 2023, after which the NPSP will be used to help guide Thornton's property management decisions.

The Thornton Water Project

The Thornton Water Project (TWP) will complete the infrastructure necessary to move Thornton's Poudre River water rights from the Water Supply and Storage Company facilities to the city of Thornton. The TWP consists of an approximately 70 mile, 42" diameter buried raw water pipeline and related facilities. Currently, Thornton has installed seven miles of pipe in Weld County. Thornton is completing design of the pipeline through Weld and Adams Counties and expects to begin construction on those segments later in 2023. There is also a portion of the pipeline – approximately seven miles in length – that will be constructed in Larimer County. Thornton applied for and was denied a 1041 land-use permit from Larimer County for the construction of this segment of the pipeline. Thornton sued the County for its denial. While the District Court and Colorado Court of Appeals did not overturn the County's denial, the Courts did provide guidance on several contested issues. In 2023, Thornton will submit another application to Larimer County for approval of the seven-mile segment of pipeline that is within Larimer County's jurisdiction.

A COMMUNITY & BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

– Eric Wallace, Founder/Owner, Left Hand Brewing Co
Past Chair of the Brewer's Association and Colorado Brewers Guild

Colorado's growth and development need to be managed differently to ensure responsible use of limited land resources and water while balancing the needs of various stakeholders.

- **Limiting Sprawl and Inefficient Land Use:** Traditional sprawl patterns can lead to increased urban sprawl, which not only consumes valuable land but also exacerbates infrastructure and transportation challenges. By prioritizing infill and redevelopment of obsolete properties, cities can make more efficient use of existing infrastructure and resources, reducing the pressure to expand into new areas.

- **Coordinated Municipal Planning:** The impacts of one city's development decisions can ripple across municipal boundaries, affecting neighboring jurisdictions. Coordinated planning and collaboration between cities are essential to address common challenges and ensure a more holistic approach to economic development.
- **Collective Impact Model:** The Longmont Economic Development Partnership's collective impact model, which involves engaging all stakeholders, can be a powerful tool for aligning interests and working towards common goals. When different groups collaborate rather than work at cross purposes, it becomes easier to find solutions that benefit everyone.
- **Water Management and Allocation Conflicts:** Water management is a critical issue in Colorado, given its semi-arid climate and increasing demands from various sectors. Conflicts over water allocation need to be addressed in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the interconnectedness with other challenges like housing, transportation, agriculture, and tourism.
- **Balancing Stakeholder Needs:** As mentioned, this is not a zero-sum game. Balancing the needs of stakeholders with legitimate claims to resources, whether they are public commons or under private ownership, requires careful consideration and cooperation.

To address these challenges effectively, a combination of policy measures, community engagement, and long-term planning will be essential. Here are some potential strategies:

- **Smart Growth Policies:** Implement smart growth policies that promote compact, mixed-use development, encourage public transportation, and protect natural areas and open spaces.
- **Water Conservation and Efficiency:** Encourage water conservation and efficient water use practices across all sectors, including agriculture, industry, and residential areas.
- **Regional Cooperation:** Foster regional cooperation among cities and jurisdictions to develop coordinated plans that consider the broader impacts of development decisions.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Engage both public and private sectors in collaborative efforts to address water and land use challenges, leveraging expertise and resources from various stakeholders.
- **Long-Term Vision and Goal Setting:** Clearly define long-term goals for sustainable economic development, land use, and water management and work towards achieving them through a collective effort.
- **Public Awareness and Education:** Educate the public about the importance of responsible land and water use and involve them in decision-making processes to build support for sustainable development practices.

By adopting an integrated and collaborative approach, Colorado can effectively manage its economic growth while safeguarding its natural resources and ensuring a high quality of life for its residents.

Collaborative discussions that bring all constituent needs to the table can lead to innovative and balanced approaches that address the complex web of issues related to land, water, energy, agriculture, tourism, and economic development. Let's delve into some key points raised:

- **Common Interests:** Recognizing that the interests of various groups are more aligned than in conflict is a positive starting point. While their specific needs and concerns may differ, the overarching goal of sustainable development and balanced resource allocation can serve as a unifying principle.
- **Open Dialogue:** Engaging in open and constructive dialogue that allows each stakeholder to voice their concerns, ideas, and needs is crucial. By fostering an environment of open communication, stakeholders can better understand each other's perspectives and work towards shared solutions.
- **Adaptation and Innovation:** As mentioned, rote reliance on past approaches may not be effective in addressing present challenges. Rethinking and relearning are essential to finding new and innovative ways to manage resources and foster sustainable development.
- **Collective Acceptance of Change:** Acknowledging that progress requires accepting new truths and being willing to let go of long-held beliefs is an important aspect of creating a path forward. Embracing change and adopting forward-thinking approaches are key to overcoming obstacles.
- **Inclusive Decision-Making:** It's true that the responsibility of addressing these complex issues shouldn't fall solely on the shoulders of elected officials. Inclusive decision-making that involves a diverse cross-section of stakeholders will lead to more well-rounded proposals and solutions that benefit the greater good.
- **Balancing Economic Power:** Ensuring that decision-making is not dominated by economic power interests is crucial to prevent winners and losers in resource allocation. A balanced approach that considers the needs of all stakeholders, including those who might have less economic influence, is necessary to create a fair and sustainable path forward.

In summary, by fostering collaborative discussions, embracing new perspectives, and engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, Colorado can work towards creating a sustainable environment with responsible resource allocation for current and future generations. Building consensus and finding common ground among the various interest groups will be key to achieving long-term success. It will require dedication, open-mindedness, and a commitment to the greater good for the state and its residents.