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perspective

## A New Water Economy

By Gary Wockner

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*"Constant dripping hollows out a stone."* —  
Lucretius

The water in Colorado's Cache la Poudre River alone — 300,000 acre-feet — is worth billions of dollars. And the state's biggest river (the Colorado) produces *30 times more water* than the Poudre.

So as we look for the next big thing in economic opportunity, green jobs, and research and development, we ought to look at a "New Water Economy" similar to that of the New Energy Economy.

Water is, after all, a renewable resource.

Gov. Bill Ritter was in Fort Collins a few weeks ago introducing his Senate nominee, Michael Bennet, and discussing the dismal state of the state. As they both spoke, members of the audience were waving signs that said "Stop Glade Reservoir! Save the Poudre River!"

While Bennet and Ritter acknowledged the protesters and the controversial dam-and-reservoir project, they redirected their focus to Colorado's New Energy Economy. That's a term every American environmental group has also picked up, and all for good reason: Investing in clean energy could clear the air, cool the planet, and refuel and rebuild our economy. Colorado is well-positioned to lead in the New Energy Economy; we have ready supplies of wind, sun and a progressive citizenry that wants to push this agenda forward.

But what Colorado has more of than any other Western state is water. We're the King of Water; it's our No. 1 export "crop" in both quantity and dollars. The majority of southwestern U.S. water lands in Colorado as snow and then melts, quenching the thirst and (through farming) eventually the hunger of tens of millions of Americans, from the burbs of Phoenix to the Los Angeles basin. In addition, it helps California farmers grow crops for the entire nation.

In Fort Collins, Ritter and Bennet spoke just 100 yards away from the Cache la Poudre River, a mere mid-sized Colorado river that supports billions of dollars in tourism, recreation and agricultural economies.

Many cities around Colorado are moving forward with water conservation and efficiency programs as a response to drought, the rising cost of water, and as a means to address the new demand for water from population growth. Stated differently, there's a massive government expenditure about to take place around a very

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expensive commodity that, like energy, every single person needs every single day. We should be using this enormous resource — water and the money behind it — to expand our economy and to create green jobs, protect the environment, and save money.

Water conservation and efficiency programs at the city, state and federal level should be tied to economic recovery and stimulus programs that:

- **Incentivize the private sector to create green Colorado jobs.** Landscaping, landscape architecture, and the nursery industry represent a \$1.8 billion economy in Colorado — using government incentives to point that industry in a more sustainable low-water direction would stimulate the economy and put Coloradans back to work.
- **Invest in clean, green Colorado agriculture.** Efficient agricultural irrigation systems are the wave of the future for Colorado's \$1.6 billion irrigated agricultural economy. Government expenditures should lead that wave through incentives and investments.
- **Support research and development.** Private industries and Colorado's universities should be prime recipients of grant money to investigate and create new water efficiency technology for residences and agriculture.
- **Save money.** Conservation and efficiency are much cheaper alternatives to wasting massive amounts of money on new dams and reservoirs. Investing in conservation and efficiency can

offset future water demand and dramatically minimize public debt, a necessity in this depressed economy.

Here's an example of how a change in public policy could stimulate a New Water Economy: In 2008, Boulder County passed a ballot initiative that allowed homeowners to borrow money from the county to put solar panels on their roofs. This initiative saves energy, saves money by decreasing energy costs, increases the value of the home, and creates jobs in the solar industry.

A very similar change in policy could work for the New Water Economy by allowing homeowners to borrow public money to install high-efficiency irrigation systems or retrofit their lawns with Xeriscaped landscapes. By doing so, water will be saved, money will be saved, the value of the home will increase, and jobs will be created in the high-tech irrigation and Xeriscape sector.

Beyond the needs of the cities, the opportunities in Colorado's agricultural economy are 10 times greater. Ninety percent of Colorado water is drained from rivers and used to grow crops, much of that very inefficiently. In fact, in the Poudre River basin, the river is often drained completely to irrigate crops with what is called "flood irrigation," where a field is completely flooded and the wasted water flows off in large ditches. Government investments and incentives that encourage efficient sprinkler irrigation would save water and thus money, increase the value of farms, and help keep Colorado's rivers alive.

During his visit to Fort Collins, Sen. Bennet said

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"he'd like to help solve controversial regional issues like the Glade Reservoir project." The New Water Economy could do just that. By investing in water conservation and efficiency and by keeping water in rivers, we will be making a permanent investment in one of Colorado's biggest economic drivers: the natural environment that brought most of us here in the first place.

Case in point: While Ritter and Bennet spoke while standing near the Cache la Poudre River, condos and lofts are popping up nearby as citizens increasingly are drawn to the beautiful swath of open space along the river that meanders through town. In fact, the closer you get to the river, the higher housing prices get. This (and many other concerns) prompted the Fort Collins City Council last year to vote unanimously against the Glade Reservoir project, saying the Poudre was one of the city's "economic engines" that we could not afford to lose.

A New Water Economy, indeed.

*Gary Wockner is Colorado program director for Clean Water Action and a member of the Fort Collins Water Board. He is also co-founder of the Save The Poudre Coalition.*

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