

Mistake dries out Poudre in historic Old Town

written by: Jason Kosena, Fort Collins Coloradoan, posted by: **Dan Boniface**,
Web Producer

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FORT COLLINS - Fluctuating flows and a mistake by the state official who manages water rights on the Poudre River helped create a nearly dry Poudre in Old Town last week.

River Commissioner George Varra said he erred in pulling too much water from a diversion on the Poudre for an irrigation company but added that a dry river isn't unheard of this time of year.

"It's rare that the river will be dry in June, but it's possible," Varra said. "The exchange this week was perfectly legal; I just allowed a little more (water to be pulled) than I should have."

The miscalculation diverted too much water from a point west of North College Avenue and nearly drained the river. Witnesses said the drawdown killed fish in the river.

However, fluctuating stream flows also played a part. The end of June typically marks the end of the runoff season and a reduction in the amount of water melting out of the mountains and into the state's rivers and streams.

River rights on the Poudre River date back to the 1880s and for more than 100 years, agriculture and irrigation companies have pulled water from the river between the city and the mouth of the Poudre Canyon.

At best, only 25 percent of the water leaving the canyon ever makes its way into town, said Dennis Bode, the city's water resources manager. Because the city of Fort Collins wants to use the river to attract economic and cultural development, it's important that the Poudre have a consistent flow as it meanders through town, said City Manager Darin Atteberry.

"The drop in flows this week and at

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other times worries and concerns me," Atteberry said. "The river is very important to the city of Fort Collins and is critical to our well-being from both an economic and environmental standpoint. We will do everything we can as a city to keep an appropriate stream flow through town."

Fort Collins has some junior water rights to ensure stream flows through town, but the rights are easily trumped by senior water-right holders upstream, Bode said.

"There are times when many senior users on the river are pulling their water, and when enough of those users are upstream of College Avenue, then it can result in low flows or no flows at all in parts of the river," Bode said, adding it would be expensive to buy new rights. "There are fairly limited opportunities in terms of buying complete water rights. You can sometimes buy shares in individual ditch companies, and the city has done that over the years."

The cost of ensuring water through town would not come cheap.

Although water prices vary depending on many factors, the estimated cost of bringing an additional 100 cubic feet per second (CFS) of water through Fort Collins for one month would be \$60 million, Bode said.

The average flow through town in 2006 during the month of June was 297 CFS; in June of 2001 it was 174.

A whitewater park is in the works on the Poudre just east of North College, and the river has been viewed by city officials and City Council members as a way to aid the conceptual UniverCity program and connect Old Town to the North College area - both of which are being eyed for redevelopment.

River flow is imperative to all of those projects, said Mayor Doug Hutchinson.

"We have done some proactive things to maintain the river flow but yes, of

course, the low flows are a concern," Hutchinson said, referring to the city's existing junior right on the Poudre.

Fort Collins resident Adrian Glasenapp, who bikes to work on the Poudre River Trail through town, said he was disappointed to see the river without water this week.

"I was upset about it," he said. "I like to think of myself as an advocate for the Poudre River and all rivers, and I have a lot of respect for the river. It's our life source and it's so important and it was upsetting to see it drained."

Resident Gary Wockner, a vocal river advocate who bikes on the Poudre trail weekly, also was unnerved by the low river.

"I believe it's immoral that the laws in our state will allow a river to be drained completely dry so that it will not even sustain any aquatic life," Wockner said. "I have been aggressively working through various (means) to raise awareness about the river and also to stop projects (that will) decrease stream flows even more."

One of those projects is the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District's Northern Integrated Supply Project, which would include a reservoir northwest of Fort Collins and another on the plains near Greeley. Glade Reservoir, the proposed reservoir northwest of Fort Collins, would fill using junior rights from the Poudre. Fort Collins is not participating in the project.

Wockner and other opponents say the reservoir will further drain the Poudre through Fort Collins.

Proponents say the reservoir would have little impact on Poudre flows.

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