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Water Gets The Big Squeeze: The Hidden Cost of Urban Growth

By: Bart Miller

Bart Miller
Water Program Director
Land and Water Fund of the Rockies
2260 Baseline Suite 200
Boulder, Colorado 80302
Phone: (303) 444-1188 ext. 219
Email: bmiller@lawfund.org

Bart joined the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies in February 2000 to work on several aspects of the Water and Lands programs. As Water Program work expanded, Bart has stepped into the middle of our efforts to protect critical endangered and threatened aquatic and riparian species and to restore rivers to something approaching their natural condition. Bart became director of the Water Program in July 2001.

In Colorado's Gunnison River basin, he has worked on Land and Water Fund's opposition to the proposed molybdenum mine outside Crested Butte, helped organize the Gunnison Basin Blueprint, represented a five-client group in the Park Service water rights filing for the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, and pushed for re-operation of the Bureau of Reclamation's Aspinall Unit for the benefit of endangered fish. He has taken the lead on our efforts to make the transfer of federal water facilities a tool for environmental enhancement for watersheds in Idaho, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona. He also supervises work on our Smart Water Program, a comparative analysis of water use efficiency by several inter-mountain cities. Bart also assists LAW Fund attorneys Laird Lucas and Letty Belin on our large-scale effort to restore the Middle Rio Grande and Joro Walker in our fight against the proposed East Canyon pipeline in Utah.

Before arriving at the LAW Fund, Bart spent four-and-a-half years in the Solicitors Office, the legal staff advising the many agencies within the Department of the Interior. After an initial year in the Solicitors' Honors Program, Bart focused on natural resource issues in the Division of Indian Affairs. He is a 1995 graduate of the University of Colorado Law School and a 1988 graduate of Dartmouth College. Between college and law school, Bart gained writing and editing experience as an intern at Runner's World Magazine, volunteered for several environmental groups, worked for a computer start-up company, toiled on a local organic farm, and spent six months hiking the length of the Continental Divide in New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana.

ABSTRACT

Urban growth spreads like wildfire across the West. As we stand with jaws agape, unplanned growth runs rampant, bringing with it dramatic increases in visual impacts, traffic, pollution, habitat destruction, and strain on our quality of life. We clearly need to find a way to slow growth to meet these challenges. But there is another vitally important, and often overlooked, consequence of growth and a burgeoning population: escalating demand for water and its impact on the West's sensitive river ecosystems.

Although residents of the inter-mountain West recognize, in a general sense, that human development is limited by the resources that can sustain it, many western cities have not yet taken seriously water as a limiting factor. As this year's drought brings into much greater focus, river systems in the interior West have been stretched thin for decades to provide water for agriculture, mining, hydropower, and other uses. Today, growing urban water demand threatens to stretch rivers beyond their limits, severely imperiling native and resident fish, wildlife, invertebrates and birds.

But this cloud of trouble may have a silver lining. Recent and continuing urban growth may prove to be a catalyst for cities and their citizens to preserve the West's unique sense of place through better environmental stewardship. Growth in municipal water demand highlights the need to use water more efficiently and improve protection of river habitat. Urban populations should have the tax base and political will to work for positive change.

To fill this gap, the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies has embarked on the Smart Water Project, a comparative study of cities in the inter-mountain West to identify trends in water demand, efforts toward better water efficiency, and the environmental impact of new sources of water supply. Already, our efforts have unearthed interesting trends in per capita use and the laws, policies, taxes, and other "incentives" affecting these trends. It is becoming clear that lowering per capita use and spending resources on conservation and creative supply options will save taxpayers money and benefit the local ecosystems.

In cities like Albuquerque, Denver, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Tucson, Las Vegas, and El Paso we have contacted city managers, environmental groups, and water suppliers to dig into the depths of the present water situation and future possibilities. Our preliminary report, due out in the fall of 2002, will be a guide for all these groups to implement smart water use. It will make visible the link between urban water use and the health of nearby river systems upon which that use depends. We hope it will buy some time for river restoration.