

Agricultural Perspectives of the Chatfield Reservoir Reallocation Project

This is the fourth white paper in a series to help provide information on the Reallocation Study currently underway at Chatfield Reservoir. The purpose of the study is to determine if Front Range water providers can use an existing water storage facility to help provide for a more reliable water supply along the Front Range of Colorado. The perspectives of agricultural interests participating in the proposed project are identified in this paper. Two agricultural interests located in Weld, Adams, and Morgan Counties - Western Mutual Ditch Company, and Central Colorado Water Conservancy District - are participating in the Chatfield study, representing irrigators and other agri-businesses from Brighton to Greeley to Fort Morgan. The following narrative will offer a glimpse of agricultural perspectives by highlighting agricultural production statistics in Weld County.

Irrigation drives agricultural production in Colorado, and Weld County has a remarkable history. In 1870, Horace Greeley, Editor of the New York Tribune (“Go West, young man”) helped start the Union Colony at present-day Greeley. The first task of settlers was to construct an irrigation canal to water their crops, gardens, and fruit trees. Without adequate irrigation water, the farmers would not survive. Today’s agricultural producers are no different – adequate irrigation water is vital for a solid rural economy.

Weld County, located downstream of Denver, is ranked No. 8 in the country by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the annual value of farm and ranch products –\$273 million for crops and \$1.26 billion for livestock. Weld County leads the state in the production of sugar beets, and is also first in value of livestock, hay, eggs, poultry, cattle, and milk. It has 530,000 head of cattle, 70,000 milk cows (57% of Colorado’s milk comes from this area), along with two million eggs produced annually. Other irrigated crops include corn, cabbage, sweet corn, carrots, potatoes, sugar beets, alfalfa, pinto beans, and onions. Winter wheat, sunflowers, and malt barley are also grown. Breakfast, lunch and dinner come from Weld County – just check the label next time you visit your local grocery store.

A drive along U.S. Highway 85 in Weld County, north of Denver, is an education in modern-day agricultural production and irrigation techniques. Some fields are irrigated with water from the South Platte River. Other fields are irrigated with groundwater, pumped to the surface and applied in crop furrows or by center pivot sprinkler systems. Many irrigators in the area relied on groundwater for early season water supplies (before irrigation canals could provide river water). However, in recent years, vegetable, corn, and other crop acres have been reduced due to inadequate supplies of irrigation water. Chatfield is an important component to build a more

reliable water supply because stored water can be released during critical stages of crop growth.

Reservoirs are like savings accounts – they store water during times when river flows are physically and legally available, and release water during times of need. For those who remember the drought of 2002, water shortages became a central focus and major concern for many people in Colorado. The ability to store additional water at Chatfield Reservoir will help agriculture during times of need, in addition to the other beneficial water uses in the region.

The Chatfield Reservoir Reallocation Project is unique. It has brought together a diverse set of stakeholders in the pursuit of a common goal. Increased water storage in Chatfield Reservoir will provide benefits to the agricultural industry in the state in a way that positively impacts a major sector of the economy involving thousands of acres of farmland. Please visit www.chatfieldstudy.org for more information on this important study and proposed project.

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