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Mediator hired for water-sharing talks

Denver Water and a group of Western Slope water users hope he can help them iron out long-standing conflicts.

By Kim McGuire
Denver Post Staff Writer

Locked in an almost two-year standstill, Denver Water and a coalition of Western Slope water users

have hired a Washington, D.C., mediator to prod stalled water-sharing talks.

The two factions hope the mediator will be able to help them avoid litigation and reach agreement on some long-standing conflicts between the state's largest water provider and water users in Grand, Summit, Eagle and Mesa counties.

"I think everyone feels like this is the best way to negotiate complex,

multi-part disputes," said David Little, Denver Water's manager of water resource planning. "We're very optimistic."

Little said that Denver Water and the Western Slope group will split costs associated with the employment of John Bickerman, who will travel to Colorado next week to begin mediation.

They did not disclose how much Bickerman's services would cost but

did say they were given a "substantial" discount from Bickerman's advertised rate of \$7,500 a day to travel outside of Washington.

"He's got a great deal of experience in water matters, and that was really important," said Glenn Porzak, a Boulder water attorney representing water users and providers in Eagle County.

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"And he's got the kind of demeanor that's really right for these talks," Porzak said.

There is no set timetable for the mediation talks, but Little said he thought it might take "a year or more" to reach an accord.

"The only thing we tell each other is that it's going to take considerable time," Little said.

In May 2005, a coalition of Western Slope water users with what was billed as a "global solution" aimed to protect their supplies while giving the utility a chance to develop more projects in the high country.

The proposal, the details of

which remain under wraps, marked the first time various Western Slope factions had come together to negotiate. It was supposed to usher in a new era of Colorado water talks.

Water users on both sides of the Continental Divide, however, say some of the same complex, contentious water projects that have tripped up both sides for decades are proving just as difficult this time around.

"We think this is important to get the talks moving forward in an organized way," said Jim Pokrandt, spokesman for the Colorado River Water Conservation District.

Among the sticking points are future allocations from the

Green Mountain and Wolcott reservoirs.

Under one proposal, Denver Water would get a portion of the water stored in the federally owned Green Mountain reservoir. Two-thirds of it currently goes to the Western Slope.

A pipeline would be built to ship water from Green Mountain to Denver Water's Dillon Reservoir.

In exchange, the Western Slope might augment its supply from a new reservoir to be built near Wolcott in Eagle County.

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