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Water allocation talks resume with mediator

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The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 04/10/2007 12:58:24 AM MDT

Keystone - A professional mediator has taken on the task of ending the century-old water wars between Colorado's Front Range and the Western Slope, renewing efforts to find a "global solution" for dividing a limited resource.

John Bickerman, an attorney from Washington, admitted he was "parachuting into an ongoing war" when he met Monday for the first time with about 40 officials from the Denver Water Board and a panoply of water providers from west of the Continental Divide.

"There's a lot of emotion and friction that I've witnessed," he said. "What I do see is a commitment ... to try to work out a deal."

The historic divisions are entrenched and exacerbated by the ever-increasing demand for water on both sides of the Divide.

So suspicious are both sides that the process of choosing a mediator took months before they hired Bickerman, an adjunct law professor at Georgetown University with no personal interest in the outcome.

Still, there were signs of hope as the two sides sat together for the first time in more than a year, intent on hammering out agreements on water allocation.

"I didn't put out a seating chart, but I am glad to see some intermingling between the Western Slope and Denver Water," Bickerman observed.

Western Slope water entities - including the Colorado River Water Conservation District, county governments and water users - first proposed a water-sharing plan in May 2005.

Officials from Denver Water, however, have been hesitant to negotiate, fearing that any deal might compromise the agency's ability to provide water to its 1.1 million customers, a figure that is expected to grow to 1.9 million by 2050.

Many on the Western Slope long have resented the loss of water to the Front Range through elaborate reservoirs and pipelines and hope to ensure that enough water exists to maintain fisheries, irrigate meadows and attract tourists even while Denver tries to increase its draw from the Fraser River and Dillon Reservoir.

Among other complications, the group is working within the complexities of state water law, which requires that water be doled out first to those holding the oldest water rights in any particular drainage.

Sara Duncan, a lobbyist for Denver Water, said the process would be successful if the sides can reach agreements without further litigation.

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