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Sealing Western Slope's faucet Water officials want to ensure Denver gets permission before tapping into mountain sources.

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Bruce Finley The Denver Post

Colorado water authorities this morning will unveil a proposed truce that would shift power away from Denver toward Western Slope communities.

The Colorado River Cooperative Agreement would force utility behemoth Denver Water to obtain approval from Colorado River Basin counties and river managers before trying to divert any more water to the Front Range.

Denver did not do that before installing pipelines that draw about 130,000 acre-feet of water a year from the river across the Continental Divide to cities. Nor did Denver seek approval before launching its current Moffat Tunnel Project - now under state environmental review - to move more water to an expanded Gross Reservoir, west of Boulder.

"The practical political reality is that we're only going to be able to develop future water projects with the cooperation of the Western Slope," Denver Water manager Jim Lochhead said Wednesday. "It means we're not going to develop water in the future unless there's mutual benefit and they have agreed."

A completed agreement would allow water managers from both sides of the divide to end years of legal wrangling.

"The situation we have today is paralysis, where the west side feels threatened," Lochhead said, "and the east side feels stymied."

For Western Slope leaders, protecting Colorado River headwaters feels fair, even with 80 percent of Colorado's population east of the divide.

"There's an understanding that squeezing that last drop out of the mountains might still be possible," said Eric Kuhn, general manager of the Colorado River District. "But the only way it might be possible is a very cooperative kind of way."

Gov. John Hickenlooper planned to join a posse of water authorities in the Broad Axe Barn at Devil's Thumb Ranch in Tabernash, near the headwaters of the Colorado. He is expected to push the proposed truce and call for mitigation of the Moffat project's harm to fisheries and mountainsides.

Four years in the making, the truce also shifts Colorado suburbs toward reuse of water.

Provisions in the agreement obligate Denver Water to share its treated wastewater with suburbs struggling to wean themselves off of wells with the condition that suburbs stop trying to divert Colorado River water on their own.

"Nobody's had a chance to look at (the agreement), but I'm going to give it a fair shot," said Steve Board, a hydrogeologist and Douglas County commissioner who is scrutinizing south-metro water initiatives. "I agree with the governor, Denver Water and Western Slope leaders that we've needed, for decades, to come to some kind of resolution. We've all spent decades in water court over who owns what and how to get more. It's time to try a different approach."

The Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which also is pushing to divert more water, is pursuing a truce with Colorado River Basin communities as well.

Figuring out how to cooperate, collaborate and conserve water within Colorado probably will help the state negotiate for water with downriver states, conservancy manager Eric Wilkinson said.

"California and Arizona obviously have their own cooperative efforts," he said. "It gives an advantage to Colorado to be able to address our own water- supply challenges more effectively."