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Water leaders float accord If ratified, the deal would resolve age-old disputes, but more challenges loom.

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TABERNASH - After crafting a byzantine east-west truce, Colorado water authorities Thursday turned their attention to another looming challenge: storing more mountain water before it flows out of the state.

Gov. John Hickenlooper and top leaders said Thursday that meeting projected water shortfalls likely will require increased storage.

But rather than a massive new reservoir, like the ill-fated Two Forks decades ago, they're leaning toward a strategy of enlarging existing reservoirs.

"Certainly, expansion of existing reservoirs has a couple things going in its favor: Less expensive. Less controversial," Hickenlooper said.

Inundating a large area, as Two Forks would have done, "is a 25-year battle that really ends up with no winners," he said.

Hickenlooper's senior water adviser, John Stulp, is charged with identifying potential expansions that would allow some future growth without drying up more acres of cropland.

Stulp said the Chatfield and Rueter- Hess reservoirs south of Denver can hold more water, as can Halligan and Seaman reservoirs near Fort Collins. Hickenlooper suggested aquifers depleted by south Denver suburbs also could serve as a reservoir if recharged with water.

The 34-party **Colorado River Cooperative Agreement** unveiled Thursday, if ratified, would push Colorado away from trans-basin water diversions to sustain growth and compel reuse of Denver's treated wastewater.

The deal is designed to settle stalemated legal disputes that have pitted Western Slope environmental interests against utility behemoth Denver Water.

Denver would need approval from Colorado River Basin counties and river managers before drawing more water through its diversion tunnels under the Continental Divide. Western Slope parties, except for Grand County, would stop opposing Denver's proposed Moffat project to move 18,000 acre-feet of river water to an expanded Gross Reservoir west of Boulder.

Denver also would share its treated wastewater with groundwater- dependent south-metro

suburbs - with the condition that suburbs abstain from diverting Colorado River Basin water on their own.

Denver also would impose a 12.5 percent surcharge on wastewater sales and use some of the proceeds to increase an overall \$25 million contribution to Western Slope communities for water facilities and environmental restoration.

Western Colorado leaders recognize that politically powerful south- metro suburbs likely will turn to Denver to help reduce their dependence on wells, said Eric Kuhn, manager of the Colorado River District.

"Denver becoming their water supply rebounds all the way to the Western Slope," he said.

Colorado's water calculus is complicated by climate change.

Warmer temperatures "will lead to an earlier runoff. On the other hand, you'll lose more water through evaporation," said Marty Hoerling, co-author of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's latest assessment.

While sportsmen's groups may question reservoir expansions, increased water storage can help maintain mountain ecosystems, Kuhn said.

"You can do things in a more comprehensive way to help environmental flows," he said.

The agreement refers to potential cooperative water projects between the Front Range and Western Slope parties, though storage projects aren't specified, Denver Water manager Jim Lochhead said.

Any reservoir expansions would have to be reconciled with Colorado's obligations to deliver water to downriver states such as California.

Moving ahead to address looming water shortages could not be done without a new collaborative framework, Hickenlooper said in an interview.

"This state has to realize, people in metropolitan Denver have to realize, that their self-interest is served by treating water as a precious commodity and that its value on the Western Slope is just as relevant as its value in the metro area," he said.

"Certain parts of this water may be legally Denver's water, or Aurora's water. But it's all Colorado's water."