

For more information on water resources in the Four Corners region contact the:

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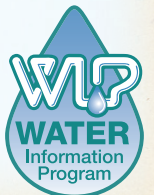
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WATER RESOURCES IN THE FOUR CORNERS REGION



In the Four Corners region, water is managed through a controlled and critical set of complex laws, water rights, storage and distribution facilities, and management agencies.

While water law and administration may differ in each state, most western states follow the "law of prior appropriation," which can be stated as "first in time (use), first in right." The senior water rights belong to the senior water users, provided they can demonstrate continued "beneficial use" of the water.



Photo courtesy of Cortez Journal / Sam Green

AGRICULTURAL WATER USE

Early in the history of the Four Corners region, farmers began to acquire water diversion rights, create ditch (irrigation) companies, and irrigate lands to increase crop yields.

Most agricultural users do not own water rights directly, rather they own "ditch shares" or an interest in diversion rights as members of an irrigation company. Others have contracted for

"project water" from a federally funded U.S. Bureau of Reclamation reservoir, such as McPhee Reservoir near Dolores or Lemon Reservoir near Durango. Water for irrigation is "raw water" which is not pre-treated and is allocated on a per acre-foot basis and a larger volume billing structure. Distribution from water reservoirs follows irrigation canals, with headgates opening to each lateral (ditch) along the canal. A 'ditch rider' oversees the headgates on larger ditches, and State Water Commissions are responsible for oversight of water diversions from source rivers or creeks in a particular drainage.

MUNICIPAL WATER USE

During southwest Colorado's by-gone years, cities filed on municipal water rights, developed municipal water systems, and began to develop water pipeline networks to distribute water to their residents.

Municipal and industrial water resource management is different from that of agricultural, even though the same river systems and water reservoirs are used by all water users as their source of water.

Municipal use requires a dependable water right that is usually more expensive to acquire, develop, and manage than other limited or seasonal diversion rights. Although only three to five percent of the water resources in the Four Corners region are utilized by municipal water users, their demand on water resources is year round and requires a constant supply.

As compared to water for agriculture, municipal water is much more expensive and is treated for domestic consumption. It is also pressurized for distribution to individual households or businesses. In addition, municipal water systems may provide raw or treated water for irrigation (golf courses, parks, aquatic facilities), public safety (fire protection and

suppression), commercial and industrial purposes, and maintaining city infrastructure (street washing or irrigation of median strips).



*Photo - Ridges Basin Dam
Courtesy of Robert Wolff*

WATER STORAGE

Approximately 66 percent of the annual water flows from Colorado watersheds occur during the late spring and early summer runoffs. This seasonal water flow cannot be fully utilized by Colorado agriculture, communities, and residents unless it is stored in reservoirs. Vallecito, Lemon, McPhee, Jackson Gulch, Ridges Basin, and numerous smaller reservoirs store spring flows from the Dolores, San Juan, and San Miguel watersheds for year round beneficial use in southwestern Colorado. Only three percent of the annual waterflow occurs during the winter months of December, January, and February. Without water storage in southwestern Colorado, there would not be a secure water supply for agriculture, communities, and residents during the low-flow winter months or the dryer late summer months.