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Trout Unlimited: Upper Colorado River 'on the brink'

Proposed Moffat Tunnel project could also lead to more diversions

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SUMMIT COUNTY, CO COLORADO,

GRAND COUNTY, Colo. — Increased diversions from the Fraser River, in Grand County, could put the entire Upper Colorado ecosystem at risk, a coalition of environmental groups warned Friday.

"We're really nervous. The rivers are only so resilient," said David Nickum, director of Colorado Trout Unlimited. "You can't talk about these systems in isolation," he said, referring to a Denver Water proposal to take more water out of the Fraser River and across the Continental Divide.

"Multiple water diversions have pushed the Fraser River to the brink of collapse," said Kirk Klancke, president of the Colorado Headwaters Chapter of TU, based in Grand County. "This is a river on life support."

Nickum and Klancke were referring to a draft environmental study on the Fraser River project. The conservation groups said they've already been talking with Denver Water, and that the utility is open to discussing the issues. The draft study was released by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Friday.

But the conservation groups are pushing for more public involvement, including meetings in Summit County. Residents in the Blue River drainage need to be aware of the project's potential impacts in their territory, said Becky Long of Environment Colorado. Long said that, as she understands it, the Corps is not averse to having a meeting in Summit County.

More water for Denver

At present, Denver Water's Moffat Tunnel and other diversions take about 60 percent of the Fraser's flow. The Moffat pipeline carries most of it under the Continental Divide to supply water for the Denver metro area. Under a proposed expansion of the Moffat tunnel pipeline, Denver would take even more of the river's native flows.

The conservation groups identified several broad environmental goals that should be included in the project's mitigation plan, including:

- Adequate baseline flows in the Fraser throughout the year to sustain fisheries and recreation.
- Sustained peak flows at key times of the year to mimic a natural flow regime and ensure the health and resilience of the river
- Aggressive urban water conservation and efficiency measures to save more water, such as incentives for homeowners to replace Kentucky bluegrass with drought-tolerant landscaping. More than half of residential water use goes to watering lawns.
- Ongoing monitoring of the river's health and a mitigation plan with the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions.

"We have already met with Denver Water's staff, and they seem open to discussing some of these concepts," said Mely Whiting, Legal Counsel for TU's Colorado Water Project. "We hope the Denver Water Board seizes this opportunity to create a legacy, where water development and environmental protections can go hand in hand."

"Front Range residents must recognize the connection between our water use and the health of our rivers and streams, fisheries and wildlife habitat," said Nickum. "We can't continue to take and take from these rivers

without accounting for our impacts. The glass is not even half full. It's almost drained dry."

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