

October 18, 2016

Valley Courier (Alamosa)

Ticking water meters

How we use water has been a major factor in Colorado ever since settlers appeared in Colorado, but now change is speeding up. As our incumbent state senator Larry Crowder pointed out at a candidate's meeting recently, Colorado's population is expected to double by the year 2040 or 2050.

When I moved to the state in the 1950s, 62 years ago, the population was about 1.5 million. Today it is about 5.5 mil-

Rabbitbrush Rambler



Virginia Simmons

lion. No wonder things seem to have changed!

In only another 25 years when the year 2040 rolls around, the estimated population will be nearly 8 million. Imagine the water that people will need, compared to the present number of toilet tanks, showers, dish

washers, washing machines, cooking stoves, green lawns, recreation and tourism and retirement in the surrounding lands, and, of course, clean water coming from faucets on demand.

In 2040 at least half of Colorado's population will be living in the Denver metropolitan area. And people will be fanning out across the countryside in hopes of acquiring a little more peace and quiet in the buy-and-dry areas that once were farms and ranches.

Even here in the San Luis Valley, where growth has been slower than in other areas, population will grow. Many of these people will bring with them the desires and expectations that trickle down with them from urban areas.

In the Valley Courier's account of the candidates' meeting, in describing water resources, they said that the important issues pertaining to water were water projects and education, fighting diversions of water from southern Colorado, more storage (think impoundments), conservation, reduction of waste, and protection of prior appropriation of water and property rights.

I doubt that these matters will be uppermost in the minds of some new residents and tourists, but everyone will be water consumers, whether we are newcomers or old-timers, farmers, ranchers, business owners, health care workers, bankers, teachers, environmentalists, government employees, retirees, or recreationists, and let's not forget what's left of the native wildlife and plants.

Sooner or later, the difference between merely wanting something or really needing it will matter in a world with dwindling resources, particularly water, which is essential for life. Unfortunately, no one knows how much or how little rain or snow will fall from the sky from one season or year to the next.

When I moved from the rainy East, Colorado was in the middle of a severe drought, and I began to understand that sunshine and nice scenery are not the state's whole story.

Our San Luis Valley's farmers struggled through another drought in the 1970s, and then there was an even bigger one in the early 2000s.

Meanwhile, wells were pumping and the aquifer was plummeting. Colorado water law had a lot of catching up to do. And exactly whose water were they pumping?

I have just finished reading a book that makes this problem dramatically clear. The title is "The Man Who Thought He Owned the Water" (University Press of Colorado, 2016). Living an idyll on his farm, he and others in the Platte River Valley were pumping groundwater deeper and deeper, while the metro area upriver was growing and growing and acquiring water rights faster and faster.

The book's author is Tershia D'Elgin, the daughter of a man who thought he owned the water and the great-great-granddaughter of Colorado's Governor Benjamin Eaton, a pioneer rancher and water developer in northeastern Colorado. Her informal narrative has sidebars that clearly explain how water use and laws have developed.

These are the reasons why I admire so much today's water managers and members of the Rio Grande Water Conservation District, San Luis Valley Water Conservancy District, Rio Grande Roundtable, Colorado Water Education Foundation, Ruth Heide's reporting about water issues, and conscientious farmers and ranchers. Now these groups are addressing problems that accumulated for decades.

Maybe you'll say that no one here would want to read such a long book about the Platte River Valley's agriculture and the metropolitan area's self-interests, but it's a must-read for all of us water consumers who once fantasized that Colorado would never change.

Editor's Note: The views expre