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Durango braces for water crisis

BY DAVID MARSTON

WRITERS ON THE RANGE

Denver never stops seeking more water for its burgeoning population. But Durango, a town of 19,000 people across the Rockies in southern Colorado, is taking a wait-and-see approach.

You might call this unusual because Durango has access to a backup supply. In 2011, voters approved spending \$6 million to buy 3,800 acre-feet of water storage in a reservoir called Lake Nighthorse. The rationale was simple: The town could build a pipeline and ship that water into its system whenever dry times occurred.

But since then, not much has happened.

Former city manager Ron LeBlanc tried to move the project forward before retiring in 2019. An engineering study in 2023 concluded that the town should connect Lake Nighthorse to its system using one of three possible pipeline routes. Still, no construction began.

Durango's mayor, Gilda Yazzie, says the city paid for its share of a pipe at the base of the dam, along with what's called a manifold — a device that would split water among the four users of Lake Nighthorse. But nothing has been built to connect that manifold to Durango's water system.

Lake Nighthorse itself is the scaled-down result of the Animas-La Plata Project, authorized by Congress in 1968. That project would have covered the Animas and La Plata river valleys with canals, pumps and pipelines. Instead, the final plan built just one dam and one pumping station, leaving the Animas River free-flowing.

That decision helped protect the area's natural beauty while also attracting more people to Durango. Many Western cities have learned the hard way about not securing enough water to fight wildfires. Fires racing through Los Angeles in 2025 wiped out entire neighborhoods. Water storage ran out, and hydrants went dry.

Durango water engineer Steve Harris has 52 years of experience in the field and is known for promoting water conservation. He thinks Durango is making a serious mistake by not connecting a pipe to Lake Nighthorse.

"The city has a century of the Animas and Florida Rivers being so good to them with steady year-around flows that they don't even know they need storage," he said. "They may only find out during a water crisis."

Right now Durango has 10 to 30 days of water stored in its Terminal Reservoir, which holds 267 acre-feet. That's annual water consumption for about 600 households; Durango has more than 9,000 households. The city depends mainly on the Florida River, with large draws of summer water from the Animas River. When the two rivers flow normally, the taps run. If both rivers dry up or clog with debris from fires, the city could run out of water within weeks.

Climate change and a 25-year drought highlight this risk. In the past eight years, on 34 days, the Animas River averaged less than 100 cubic feet per second, a low level reached only twice in the previous 120 years. Close calls have happened. In 2002, the Missionary Ridge fire filled both rivers with ash and debris and forced the city to cut back pumping. In 2015, the Gold King Mine spill sent millions of gallons of waste into the Animas River, stopping city pumping for a week.

As for building a pipeline to Lake Nighthorse and a much-needed new water treatment plant — an investment water engineer Steve Harris estimates at about \$100 million — “it all depends on how much the citizens are willing to pay for water.”

Durango’s reluctance to invest in its water system stands out in the West, where water storage is usually characterized as urgent. Las Vegas for example, built three separate intake tunnels into Lake Mead to make sure it could keep taking water even as the reservoir dropped.

Durango’s Lake Nighthorse pipeline remains a paper concept. This winter, with snowpack in the San Juan Mountains the lowest recorded in generations, it’s time the town acts to guarantee more water. Fighting flames with empty hoses would be a sorry sight.

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