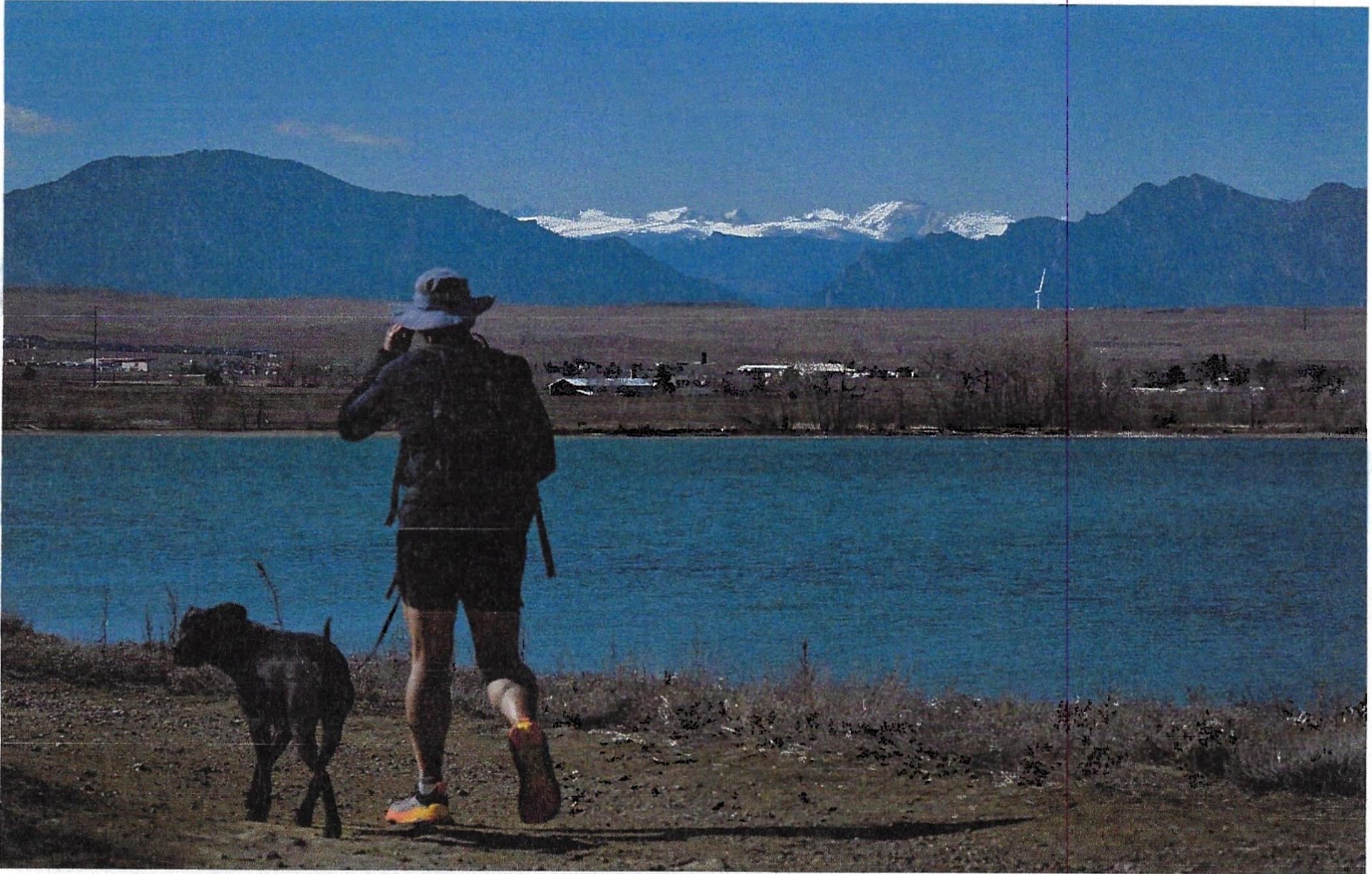
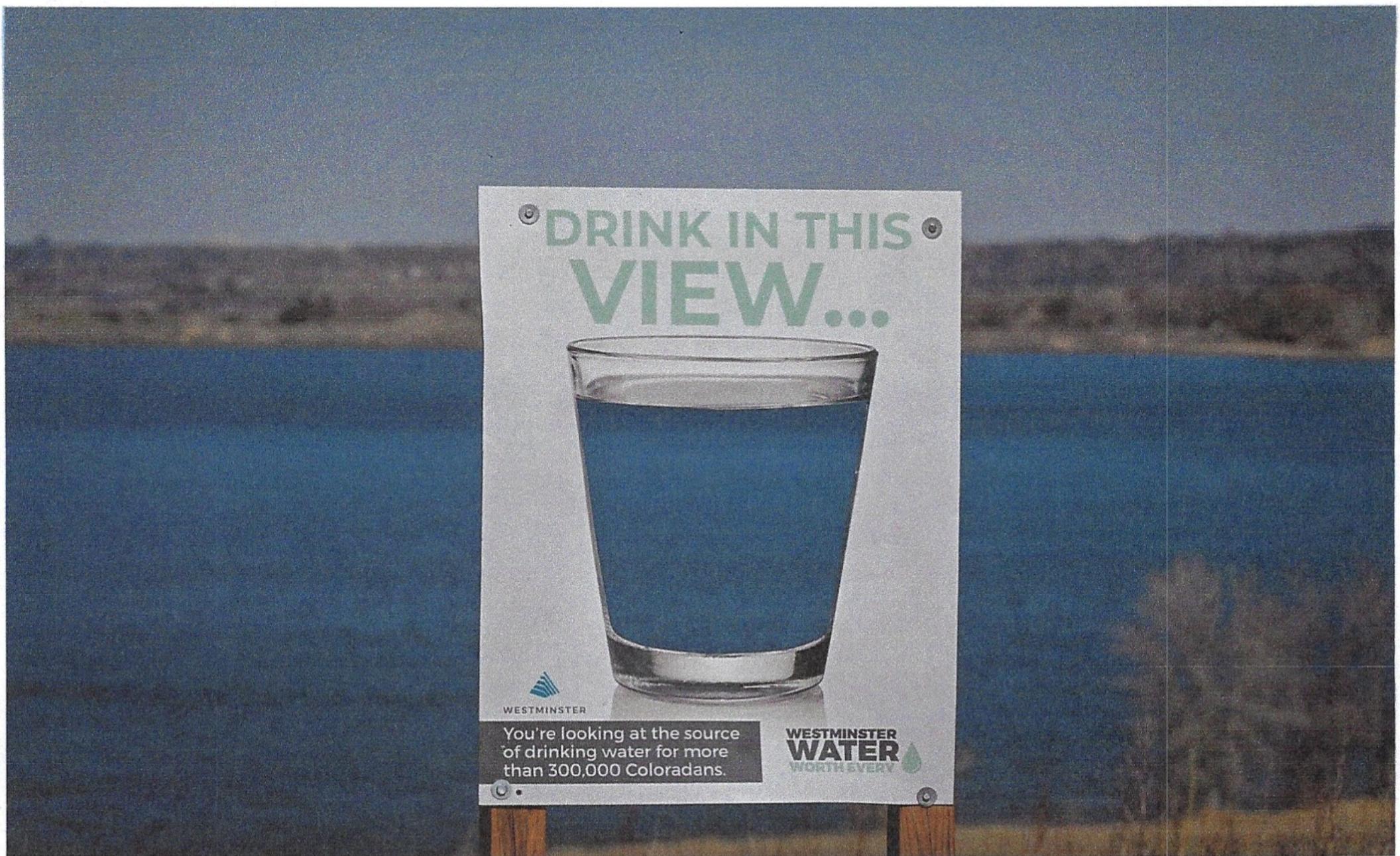


Cities begin enacting outdoor watering limits

Thornton first to adopt spring restrictions; Denver Water, others prepare similar measures



A man and a dog walk at Standley Lake Regional Park in Westminster on Wednesday. PHOTOS BY AARON ONTIVEROZ — THE DENVER POST



A Westminster Water sign at Standley Lake, which serves as water storage for Westminster, Thornton and Northglenn.

BY JOHN AGUILAR

JAGUILAR@DENVERPOST.COM

When Thornton enacted a Stage 1 drought declaration last week, it became the first city in metro Denver to place a mandatory twice-weekly limit on outdoor watering for the upcoming hot season. But the northern suburb likely won't be the last.

Metro-area cities and utilities are starting to lay out defensive strategies against what has become a crispy-dry 2026, starting with an alarmingly warm and dry winter in Colorado that's been marked by one of the worst snowpacks in recorded state history.

Denver Water, which serves 1.5 million people, could follow a similar track to Thornton's by month's end. Aurora Water, which is relied upon by 400,000 people, may be right behind with its own Stage 1 drought declaration in early April.

"We're looking for a 20% reduction in outdoor irrigation compared to last year," said Shonnie Cline, an Aurora Water spokeswoman.

The Aurora City Council is set to have a study session on the city's water situation on March 23, followed by a council vote on potential watering restrictions on April 6.

"We're at the lowest snowpack we've been at since 1978," Cline said.

Locally, that also translates to abysmal conditions in the Clear Creek basin, where Westminster gets most of its water. Last week, the Westminster City Council discussed enacting a drought watch — a less-severe step than a Stage 1 declaration that would rely on voluntary cutbacks.

“The current trend is tracking just above the 2002 line for the Clear Creek basin, which is the driest year on record,” Westminster Mayor Claire Carmelia said.

Broomfield was the first metro-area city to declare a drought watch, on Feb. 9.

Jason Ullmann, the state engineer for the Colorado Division of Water Resources, said the drought of the last quarter century in the southwestern United States is believed to be the worst in the last 1,200 years. Things are particularly strained this year, with Colorado’s snowpack measuring in at just 61% of median levels for this time of year as of late last week.

This month federal forecasters projected that the Colorado River this spring will deliver 2.3 million acre-feet of water to Lake Powell, one of the river system’s largest reservoirs and downriver from much of the mountain states’ snowmelt. That’s just 36% of the median of 6.4 million acre-feet recorded annually between 1991 and 2020.

Closer to home, the latest monthly bulletin from the National Weather Service painted a grim weather picture based on conditions in Denver. Last month was the third-warmest and second-driest February in the city, while it was the least-snowiest February on record for Denver, tying 2009’s equally snow-starved February.

Exactly when the city — and region — will finally shake off their dessicated state is unknown, Ullmann said.

“There’s no guarantee we’re going to have a better year next year, so we can’t count on that,” he said. What water managers can control sits on the demand side of the water ledger.

Thornton gets the bulk of its water from the Upper South Platte River and Clear Creek watersheds, which are at “record low levels,” according to a memo accompanying last Tuesday’s council meeting.

Emily Hunt, Thornton’s interim infrastructure director, says the concern lies not so much with the summer ahead but with the summers to follow, assuming precipitation stays meager. Colorado’s sixth-largest city is presently at 83% of storage capacity across the 19 reservoirs that hold its water. It stores a large portion of the water it consumes in Standley Lake, which is also a water source for Westminster and Northglenn.

“We’re going into the summer with good storage, but with this snowpack, we’re not going to be able to top off our reservoirs the way we normally would,” Hunt said. “We’re basically trying to keep the year in balance so that if the drought continues into next year, we’ll be in pretty good shape.”

Thornton’s new rules stipulate that watering can occur only between 6 p.m. and 10 a.m. Violations of the twice-weekly schedule, which goes into effect May 1, will result in a warning for a first infraction.

If not remedied within 10 days, households face a \$100 fine, while commercial customers will pay a \$250 fine. Repeated infractions, including the failure to address leaky pipes, will result in heavier fines.

The city provides a guide for optimum watering times, which differ depending on the type of sprinkler head that’s used. Residents will be able to choose which two days of the week they water their lawns.

Denver Water operates in a forward-looking manner as well. Greg Fisher, its manager of demand planning and efficiency, said Colorado’s largest water supplier is taking on this summer’s challenges with 2027 and 2028 in mind.

"We are very much in drought preparation," he said.

The good news is that Denver Water's storage capacity is at about 80% — just a little lower than the 85% it typically sits at this time of year, Fisher said.

And efficiencies in landscaping and indoor water use are a world away from where they were in 2002, with the average household using 35% less water than it did 24 years ago.

Fisher expects the utility's Board of Water Commissioners to make a drought declaration by the end of March.

"With these dry conditions, I think we're headed to a Stage 1 declaration," he said.

Aside from a mandatory twice-weekly outdoor watering schedule under a Stage 1 declaration — Denver Water would assign watering days to households in its service area — the utility would also ask restaurants not to serve water to customers unless requested and to ask hotels not to wash sheets or towels unless requested.

"If we get better weather, we can scale back on restrictions," Fisher said.

But even under a mandatory water reduction scenario, green thumbs can still make their front and backyards sing this summer, said Cassey Anderson, a horticultural specialist with Colorado State University Extension in Adams County.

"You don't have to water a lot to water well," she said.

Trees should be a focus, Anderson said, with the most effective watering applied on the ground in a radius from the trunk all the way out to the tips of the branches. Kentucky bluegrass, a notoriously thirsty grass that has become a villain in the eyes of water experts and policy makers, will go dormant without water — but will be primed to bounce back in more auspicious conditions.

"You aren't going to kill it by not watering it for a season," she said.

Anderson cautioned that this summer might not be the time to put in a new drought-tolerant or native garden, given that new plantings require extra water to establish themselves properly.

Carmelia, the Westminster mayor, says there is nothing to do but hope that the supply side of the water ledger eases up after the start of spring, on Friday.

"The silver lining is that March and April are typically the wettest months of the year, and there's still time for Mother Nature to come through for us," she said.