

Aurora wants to tap water rights to fill new reservoir

High country coalition: 'We don't have the water' for more diversions

Translate

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Aurora Water officials last week confirmed previous Vail Daily reporting that the Front Range city hopes to use its existing water rights in the Homestake Creek Valley in Eagle County dating back to the 1950s to fill a proposed new reservoir on the eastern side of the Continental Divide in Park County.

Aurora Water previously said it is not slow-walking its controversial Whitney Reservoir project on Aurora and Forest Service land in Eagle County while it gets approval for Wild Horse Reservoir in Park County — a project that would contain up to 95,000 acre-feet and just last month filed for a dredge-and-fill permit with state regulators.

Whitney Reservoir, a partnership between Aurora and Colorado Springs that has yet to formally apply for federal approval but has conducted feasibility test drilling, could contain up to 20,000 acre-feet of water, which is the same amount of average annual water yield the two "Homestake Partners" are entitled to under the 1998 Eagle River Memorandum of Understanding.

Water from the Whitney project would be pumped upstream to Aurora's existing Homestake Reservoir that holds 43,600 acre-feet — approved and built before federal environmental regulations in the 1960s — through a tunnel into Turquoise Lake in neighboring Lake County on the other side of the Divide. Water for Wild Horse Reservoir could travel the same way.

Asked if Aurora was required to outline how much water it will take out of the Homestake drainage, which flows into the Eagle and then Colorado rivers in Eagle County, to fill Wild Horse, state officials considering the dredge-and-fill permit did not have specific numbers.

"This project will use existing water rights from the Arkansas and Colorado river basins," said Kaitlyn Beekman, communications and special projects unit manager with the Water Quality Control Division of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. "The proposed reservoir would be filled by the Otero Conveyance System — part of the Homestake Water Project — located south of the proposed Wild Horse reservoir site."

The largest configuration of Whitney would store 20,000 acre-feet — 1 acre-foot is 325,851 gallons — and the smallest of four proposed alternatives was 6,850 acre-feet. It's unclear how much of that annual yield Aurora would be looking to transfer via tunnels and pipelines from Homestake to Turquoise to Twin Lakes and then over to the new Wild Horse Reservoir.

"It is difficult to provide specifics regarding the amount of water from Homestake Creek that would be conveyed to the proposed Wild Horse Reservoir during a wet year as there are many hydrological and operational variables that

could influence the amount of water conveyed to the project in any given year,” said Zachary Henry, senior communications strategist for Aurora Water.

“One thing to note is that the proposed 95,000 acre-feet Wild Horse Reservoir is not going to fill in one or two years,” Henry added. “Because this reservoir would be filled with our existing Arkansas and Colorado river water rights, it would take time to fill.”

Local water stakeholders are closely watching this new twist in the Homestake saga that dates back to nasty litigation in the 1990s that resulted in the Eagle River MOU. The Forest Service was inundated with comments in 2020 when the two Front Range cities did test drilling for Whitney.

Eagle River Coalition Executive Director Vicki Flynn said it really doesn’t matter how much water Aurora wants to take from Homestake Creek over to the Front Range via Wild Horse.

“We’re a data-driven organization, so I can’t necessarily speak about the amount or ... what they’re planning to take out, but our organization is certainly opposed to new out-of-basin diversion projects,” Flynn said. “This obviously would take water from our watershed and the Colorado River headwaters. So we’re recognizing that it’s a significant potential ... impact.

“Any out-of-basin diversion is 100% consumptive use, and we don’t have the water,” Flynn added. “So, from our perspective, it’s not something we believe in and support. We 100% disagree with any further diversions from the watershed and we are engaging in the permitting process with the state to have our community voice heard.”

There’s also the question of how much more new water storage is needed in Colorado given how relatively empty existing reservoirs are. Nearby Green Mountain Reservoir is 86% empty, for instance, and Aurora’s local Homestake Reservoir is 57% empty due in part to record low snowpack last winter and the ongoing severe drought exacerbated by human-caused climate change.

Eagle County, which last month acknowledged it would now be engaged in the Wild Horse process and closely watching permitting when contacted by the Vail Daily, updated that statement this week:

“Eagle County is still evaluating the Wild Horse Reservoir project and associated federal and state permitting, including review of the CDPHE Dredge and Fill application and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management NEPA process for the proposed use of federal mineral materials to construct a dam,” said Justin Patrick, Eagle County’s strategic director of communications.

Aurora Water officials this month met with local water officials to discuss the project.

“We had a productive meeting last Friday with Eagle River Water and Sanitation District, Eagle County, the Eagle River Coalition, and several other organizations in the Eagle River community,” Aurora Water’s Henry said, adding Aurora briefed them on the need for Wild Horse and the status of several environmental reviews and permitting processes for the project.

In 2018, Aurora Water paid \$4.1 million for 150 acres of private land in the Homestake drainage, about 5 miles downstream from Homestake Reservoir along Forest Road 703. At the time of the test drilling, it was leasing its land back to the former owner for a nominal fee.

Aurora’s land, which would be inundated to accommodate a large portion of Whitney Reservoir’s surface area, is braided with streams and waterfalls and is lush with ancient fens and other wetlands. It’s also home to a 10th Mountain Division cabin once reportedly used by officers for recreation.