

In the drying West, here is how Aurora is leading water conservation

BY MIKE COFFMAN

GUEST COMMENTARY

People who call Colorado home know the sun is often shining and that chapstick is a necessity because of the dry air. Annual precipitation along the Front Range averages about 15 inches, including rain and snow. That is about half of the U.S. annual average of about 38 inches.

Water has played a critical role in Aurora's history and will be an even more important determinant of its future. Because Aurora is not near a major river or natural water body, nearly all of the water residents use begins as mountain snowpack, captured as runoff and transported from watersheds as far as 150 miles away. City leaders in the 1950s recognized that the only way Aurora could control its future was through significant investments in water rights and infrastructure. Today, the community benefits from that foresight and determination.

That reality — limited local supply paired with long-term planning — has shaped how Aurora approaches water use today. In a semiarid environment where water is not abundant, sustainability depends on using every drop wisely. For more than two decades, Aurora Water has been an industry leader in conservation and is one of only four water utilities in the nation to earn the Platinum Seal awarded by the Alliance for Water Efficiency.

Outdoor irrigation — particularly the watering of cool-season turf such as Kentucky bluegrass — historically has accounted for approximately 50% of Aurora's total annual water use. In a region where water is neither abundant nor easily replaced, reducing discretionary outdoor use is one of the most effective ways to ensure Aurora can support growth through full buildout as water rights become more costly and scarce.

In response, the city adopted a water conservation ordinance in 2022 that applies to all new development. The ordinance prohibits ornamental turf in front and side yards and limits cool-season turf in backyards to the lesser of 45% of the yard area or 500 square feet for new single-family homes, while preserving turf in designated recreation areas and sports fields so residents continue to have access to functional green spaces.

Conservation alone, however, is not enough. Aurora also has been a national leader in water reuse. Since 1964, the Sand Creek Reclamation Facility has supplied non-potable reclaimed water for irrigation at parks and golf courses.

That leadership advanced further with the Prairie Waters System, which came online in 2012 and placed Aurora at the forefront of advanced water treatment and potable reuse.

Today, Prairie Waters provides up to 10 million gallons per day of purified reuse water, with long-term plans to expand capacity to as much as 50 million gallons per day. Through a rigorous multibarrier treatment process, the system produces drinking water that meets or exceeds all state and federal standards and is indistinguishable in quality from Aurora's traditional mountain water supplies.

Building on this foundation of conservation and reuse, Aurora has taken its leadership beyond city boundaries. Recognizing that water scarcity is a growing concern across the West as conditions on the Colorado River worsen,

Marshall Brown, Aurora Water's general manager, led an effort to bring water providers together around a shared conservation commitment.

In 2022, Aurora Water joined more than two dozen municipal and regional providers from across the Colorado River Basin in signing a basin-wide conservation pledge committing participants to expanded efficiency efforts, reductions in nonfunctional turf, increased reuse and recycling, and shared best practices.

In parallel with these efforts, Aurora Water has taken a strategic approach to securing future supplies by prioritizing water rights that are nearly fully reusable, allowing limited resources to go further while reducing reliance on new raw water sources.

Aurora also remains actively engaged with agricultural partners, providing long-term support to rural communities even after water rights are transferred.

Aurora's water future has never depended on abundance. It has depended on planning, innovation and stewardship — and that legacy continues today.

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