

Presentation Abstract

1935 Colorado Water Plan

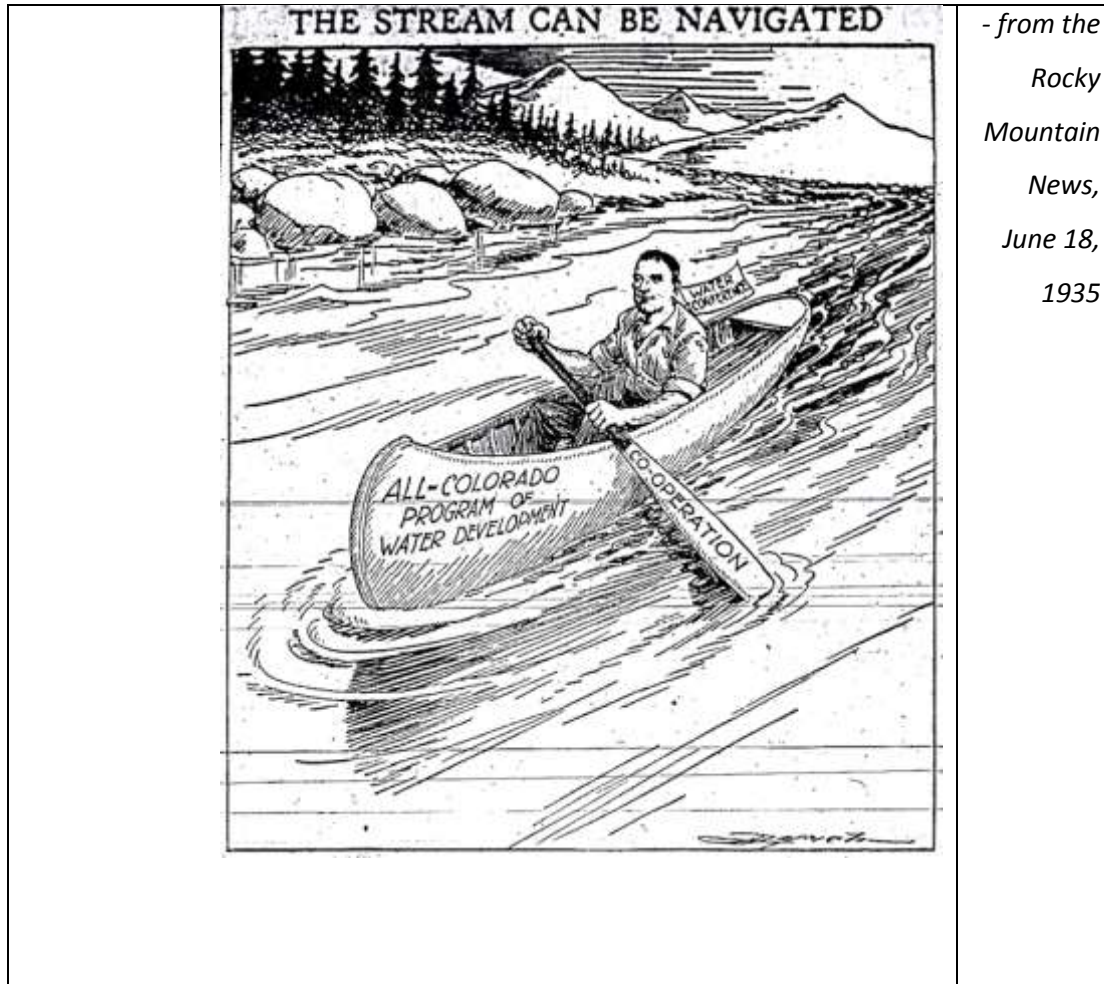
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If the Colorado Water Plan is finished in 2015 as planned, it will be in the 80th anniversary year of an “All-Colorado Water Plan” developed in 1935. Late in the spring of that year – with the East Slope suffering major flooding – water-savvy representatives from all over the state gathered in Denver at the invitation of the Colorado State Planning Commission, created in 1934 to develop the statewide coordination the federal government required for any participation in “New Deal” programs. Charged to develop a water development plan to submit to the Bureau of Reclamation, the delegates came up with a massive wish list of water projects for the state that would have cost over \$100,000,000, including three large diversions from the Upper Colorado and Gunnison Basins to the East Slope. Warned by venerable West Slope Congressman Edward Taylor that they were asking far too much, a “Committee of Seventeen” was selected that reassembled in June 1935 with more reasonable project lists from the various basins – a project list eventually pared down to \$33,600,000.

A major sticking point in developing the “All-Colorado Water Plan” was Congressman Taylor’s demand that the three largest projects proposed – all transmountain diversions from the Colorado River – would require compensatory storage for the West Slope at an acre-foot for every acre-foot diverted, an economically impossible mandate. Knowing, however, that only Congressman Taylor’s control over the Interior Department’s budget gave that mandate any weight, and fearing what would happen when Congressman Taylor was gone from office (at 77, his health was deteriorating), West Slope water leaders sat down with East Slope leaders and worked out a compromise, the “Delaney Resolution” (after Glenwood Springs rancher-attorney Frank Delaney) that required only compensatory storage to cover future losses to the basin of origin as determined by a Bureau of Reclamation study. If satisfied with the study’s findings, the West Slope leadership would not oppose a transmountain diversion that included the recommended compensatory storage.

The All-Colorado Water Plan was accepted by the State Planning Commission and the governor, and sent on to the Interior Department. Largest of the projects proposed was the Colorado-Big Thompson; it required two more years to hammer out all the details, but that huge project received the blessing of Congress in the summer of 1937. Neither of the other two Colorado River projects was built by the Bureau as set forward in the Plan: Denver felt no compulsion to compensate the West Slope for water it took and eventually did the Blue River diversion on its own, and the Upper Gunnison Basin decided it

would rather keep its water than trade some for compensatory storage. But many of the other projects in the All-Colorado Water Plan were either actually built or surveyed for construction; some of the projects surveyed proved unfeasible, but to some extent that water plan guided water development in Colorado through the rest of the reclamation era.



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