



WATER POLICY PRIORITIES

Water is a limited resource and its proper use is a vital issue affecting La Plata County and each one of its citizens. La Plata County relies on water not only for municipal and industrial uses, but also depends on it to support robust agricultural, recreational and resource development industries and to protect precious environmental resources.

The County understand the need to protect and enhance its water resources, and because of the importance of water quantity and water quality to residents and businesses, the Board of County Commissioners is committed to maintaining water as one of its top priorities.

La Plata County sets its water policy priorities as follows. Each of the priorities listed below are of equal importance to the County and no one priority has more import than any other:

1. Develop and maintain water infrastructure throughout unincorporated La Plata County

General Statement: Infrastructure plays a crucial role in water quality, water quantity, supply management, efficiency and conservation. Presently, in many areas La Plata County lacks the water infrastructure necessary to ensure that residents have access to adequate, reliable drinking water. (WAC, 2015 findings). As such, the County must promote and foster new and expanded potable water distribution systems to address the lack of domestic water infrastructure and reliable water sources and provide nonmonetary support to those entities that currently maintain existing domestic water infrastructure.

2. Develop, secure and maintain water rights necessary to meet County needs

General Statement: The County's water portfolio includes water rights used to support various County functions such as airport operations and road and bridge construction and maintenance needs. The County also has water rights, commonly referred to as the "99" and "127" rights, on the Animas River, which are available for citizens to obtain as needed to support their various water needs. It is important to continue to develop, secure and maintain adjudicated water rights for the County's use, or the use of its citizens.

3. Encourage water sensitive land use planning

General Statement: While conservation must be part of all future land use planning, so must water demand management that looks at available water supplies. Supply factors and demand management must be part of integrated land use and water planning.

4. Educate about the importance of adjudicated water rights

General Statement: Water rights are distinct from other property interests and the right to use the water in streams, springs or ditches is appropriated to specific individuals or entities through an allocation process adjudicated by Colorado water courts. Once adjudicated, these vested water rights allow the owner to use portions of the waters of the natural streams in the State of Colorado, in order of priority, to the exclusion of junior appropriators.

5. Foster intergovernmental cooperation on water quality and quantity issues

General Statement: Water is vital to all citizens of La Plata County, the State of Colorado, and downstream users. Local governments (counties, municipalities and special districts), the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, San Juan Basin Public Health and many other organizations and public agencies, including state and federal agencies, all have various interests and responsibilities in overseeing and ensuring water quantity and quality in La Plata County. As such, intergovernmental cooperation is key to protecting this vital resource.

6. Protect water quality

General Statement: Water quality and quantity are inextricably connected. (State Water Plan (4-18)). Stormwater and wastewater management, infrastructure and cross-contamination issues are vitally linked to providing safe-drinking water to residents and ensuring adequate supplies for agricultural, recreational and environmental needs. Further, other contaminants, such as acid mine drainage, need be addressed to protect La Plata County's waters.

7. Support conservation efforts and ecosystem/environmental preservation

General Statement: The necessity for water development in the County must be balanced against the desire and need to protect and conserve ecological, economical, recreational, agricultural, riparian and other resources in La Plata County. Tools to conserve and protect the County and cultural, geographical, historical and scenic resources, watersheds and wildlife must be developed together with water management and land use policies.

8. Support forest health and wildfire mitigation efforts

General Statement: The National Association of State Foresters estimates that more than half of the nation's drinking water originates from forested landscapes. Thus, the health of our forests has a profound effect on water quality and quantity. Forest management activities such as pest management, fire management and wildfire mitigation activities must be pursued to protect the health of our forests and protect La Plata County's watersheds.

9. Support agriculture

General Statement: La Plata County has a rich agrarian history, and the County is committed to protecting agricultural activities in La Plata County. Increasing municipal and industrial demands for water, both on the western slope and the front range, and continued growth and development are increasingly in conflict with agricultural uses for water. The Statewide Water Supply Initiative estimates that by 2050, Colorado may lose 500,000 to 700,000 acres of currently irrigated farmland to meet municipal demands. (Colorado Water Plan, Chapter 6.4.a). Thus, there is a need to work towards balancing agricultural land use with growth and development to ensure that adequate water supplies will exist for agricultural purposes in the County.

10. Support the local economy

General Statement: According to the Colorado Water Plan, “[a]griculture uses the largest amount of water in Colorado and is the economic backbone of many rural communities. As such, preserving Agriculture is vital to Colorado.” Further, recreational activity from the Colorado River and its tributaries produces over \$9.6 billion in economic activity in Colorado. (2012 Study from Protect the Flows). Water is vital to agricultural, industrial recreational, and tourism economies in La Plata County.

11. Oppose trans-mountain and trans-basin diversions of water

General Statement: Trans-mountain and trans-basin diversion of water challenge the ability of the County to maintain agricultural, industrial and recreational uses and threaten the capability to develop supplies needed for residential growth. Further, over-adjudication of water in northern Colorado strains the western slope’s ability to meet compact call requirements, and additional diversions of water will increase the threat of compact calls and jeopardize the State’s ability to satisfy such calls and in-stream flow demands on rivers in southwest Colorado.

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