

Animas-La Plata Water Project Threatens Animas and San Juan Rivers

by Tamara Wiggans

Running the maze of Southwestern water politics gets tedious and I'd much rather just be out running the river. But running the river has become a threatened and endangered activity, especially the Animas River near Durango, Colorado and the San Juan River in southeastern Utah.

The threat comes in the form of yet another major water development scheme known as the Animas-La Plata Project (A-LP). This project would reduce the Animas River to a mere trickle, rendering rafting impossible. And as the main, free-flowing tributary to the San Juan River, Animas water is often the only thing keeping boating (and fish) alive on the San Juan. Flows are already depleted by irrigation via Navajo Dam and Reservoir upstream of the Animas and San Juan confluence. In dry years, the Animas is literally a life-safer to the San Juan.

Rafting and kayaking on the Animas is now estimated to be an annual 3 million dollar business in Durango. 1993 Bureau of Land Management figures show that last year approximately 12,000 people floated down the San Juan, famous for its Anasazi archaeology and scenic "Goosenecks" canyon. These popular and unique stretches of river will be lost to boaters, and as important habitat for endangered fish - if A-LP is ever built.

The proposed project is a complicated and extraordinarily expensive series of pumps, pipelines and reservoirs. Massive amounts of electricity would power the pumps, taking water out of the Animas River, pushing it over a thousand feet uphill, into Ridges Basin Reservoir and points beyond, ultimately ending up in the La Plata River drainage to the west.

The Bureau of Reclamation desperately wants to build A-LP, probably its last big project ever. The price tag alone is an astounding -- \$675 million -- and the return is estimated to be 62 cents for every \$1 invested, making A-LP a real boondoggle. The Bureau doesn't have a real good track record of staying within its budget. A-LP will likely follow in the footsteps of the nearby Dolores Project, which at 79% completion was 750% over budget, hiking A-LP's possible price tag up to \$5 billion!

Glaring omissions in the Bureau's 12-year-old Environmental Impact Statement have provided opponents with plenty of ammunition, with which they've gone to court and repeatedly won. After a feeble attempt in 1992 at updating the 1980 EIS, the Bureau was hammered by negative public comments, including substantial criticism from the Environmental Protection Agency for ignoring the Clean Water Act.

In addition, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service researchers have been finding endangered Colorado Squawfish is the San Juan. The Bureau has now been forced into funding a 7-year study of the fish and their habitat needs (See "What is a R.I.P.?", in this issue). The Bureau still hopes to re-revise the EIS soon, which could be challenged again in courts by opponents.

All of these complications would have killed any other project in these days of money problems and increased environmental awareness. But A-LP has two things going for it:

1. The main motivation for building A-LP is to satisfy water rights of the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribes. By providing the Utes with water to develop their large coal reserves and agricultural lands, A-LP will take care of the tribal water claims that might otherwise threaten Anglo farmers and water users. The popular U.S. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado is a long-time supporter of A-LP and makes his home in Ignacio, center of the Southern Ute Reservation. Campbell is Northern Cheyenne, and angrily accuses opponents of A-LP as being anti-Native American.

2. Frank E. (Sam) Maynes, Durango's aggressive and legendary water attorney, has held the A-LP together despite repeated setbacks. His Durango law firm represents the Southwestern Water Conservancy District, the A-LP Water Conservancy District, five other sub-districts, the Southern Ute Tribe, La Plata Electric, and at times, Pittsburgh and Midway Coal Co. Intimidating, enormously influential, and a mastermind in the game of water politics, Maynes' tenacious leadership has kept the project afloat since 1968 when it was first authorized by Congress.

THE GOOD NEWS is that support for A-LP is eroding, and that opposition to the project is gaining momentum. Many Southern Utes have joined farmers, boaters, fiscal conservatives, and environmentalists in fighting A-LP, creating a diverse and determined force to be reckoned with.

Soaring costs and federal deficit have forced A-LP backers to split the project into two phases. Phase II, which would now receive no federal funding, is the phase that would build pipelines, pumps, and ponds to deliver the water to the Utes. So while the tribes would be given water in the Phase I reservoir, they would have no means to utilize it.

The City of Durango is looking at less-expensive alternatives to A-LP to satisfy their growing needs. The tangled financial mess plaguing farmers on the Dolores Project, as well as the CUP (Central Utah Project) and CAP (Central Arizona Project) has agricultural interests running scared. Many farmers along the Animas River in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico are members of the Four Corners Action Coalition (FCAC), who represented in court

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the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, has several legal victories under its belt concerning A-LP.

Opponents of A-LP include FCAC, Taxpayers for the Animas River (TAR), the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA), the Sierra Club, a growing number of Ute tribal members, and others. Now they have hired former Colorado State Engineer Jeris Danielson to formulate alternatives to A-LP that will satisfy everyone's water needs while lowering environmental and financial costs.

For updates and more information contact:

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