

# San Luis Valley Embattled Over Water

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CENTER, Colo. — Unlike most restaurants in the West, where a five-year drought has intensified the never-ending quest for water, you don't have to ask for a glass of it at Rios Farmer's Buffet here. On each table, occupied or not, there are one or two large pitchers, filled to the brim.

Yet on the cash register, a sign says: "Save Our Water."

In Colorado's San Luis Valley, things are not always what they seem. And it's what's beneath the sagebrush surface that has made this the site of one of the most divisive and unusual water wars in the West.

Underneath the windswept, 60-by-90-mile valley lies an enormous underground pool believed by some geologists to contain as much as 2 billion acre-feet of water — more, possibly, than the Ogallala Aquifer, which spreads from Nebraska to Texas, and enough to easily quench the thirst of water-hungry Denver, 200 miles to the north.

That, to the alarm of the potato and barley farmers whose families have made livings off the land for generations, is precisely what a private company — American Water Development Inc. — has proposed to do.

The company contends there is water enough below the San Luis Valley for everyone.

And it has taken an intriguing approach in trying to sell the project to residents of the valley. It is presenting the project as one that would help diversify the economy and bridge the long-standing gap between rich farm owners, most White, and poor farm workers, most Hispanic.

As farmers accuse its officials of

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trying to ignite a class war in the valley's six counties — which include the three poorest in Colorado — the company has won some converts by establishing farming and ranching cooperatives for some of the valley's poorer residents. The more water the company is granted, the more land it has said it will deed over to the cooperative.

"This valley is a very poor place, yet it has a resource that's worth more than gold," said Buddy Whitlock, AWDI executive vice president. "But there are some very wealthy farmers in the valley who don't want to see things change."

"Lies and deceit . . ." said potato farmer Lynn Kopfman, a leader of the anti-AWDI forces who lives in a modest home in Center. "They're robbing the valley."

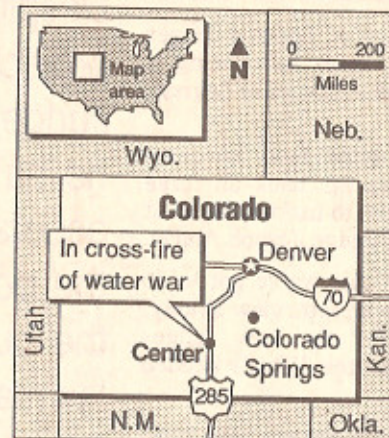
Like sides of a bowl, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains rise from one end of the valley's floor, the San Juan Mountains from the other.

Fed by mountain snow, many streams

mysteriously disappear into the ground. Although only about seven inches of rain falls on the valley a year, and though the Rio Grande, the valley's river, sometimes slows to a trickle, water is never far away. Farmhands trying to put up fences sometimes find their postholes filling with water faster than they can dig them.

The man who came up with the idea for the water project is Canadian financier and philanthropist Maurice Strong, a United Nations diplomat who purchased a 100,000-acre Spanish land grant ranch here 30 years ago.

At that time, farmers in the valley were using the Rio Grande, which flows into New Mexico and Texas, for irrigation. In the 1970s, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation received permission from Congress to pump groundwater from one particularly soggy stretch of land and divert it into the river because Colorado was depriving New Mexico and Texas of water.



The land — 38,000 acres of it — was Maurice Strong's. And that gave Strong an idea he acted on years later. In 1986 Strong and a group of investors who incorporated as AWDI filed in state water court for rights to 200,000 acre-feet of San Luis Valley groundwater.

In its original application, the company said the water would be used locally to grow crops and possibly establish a brewery. (Most of the barley grown in the valley is sold to Coors and other brewers.) But later its intent became known — to pump water from its Baca Grande Ranch through a pipeline across the Rocky Mountains to urban areas in Colorado.

The company's board members and investors include William Ruckelshaus, former director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm; Canadian financier Sam Belzberg; Bob McWhinnie, a former suburban Denver water official, and RRY Partners, a Pennsylvania investment banking firm. Strong has since pulled out of AWDI.

The company's request, reduced to 60,000 acre-feet, is pending before a state water court in Alamosa, which will hear the case in October.

The application is challenged by the Rio Grande Water Conservation District, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service and 20 other groups.

AWDI contends the project would have minimal effect on the water table. The aquifer, it says, contains 2 billion acre-feet of water and is recharged with more than 3 million acre feet a year.

(An acre foot is the amount of water it would take to cover an acre a foot deep, about 326,000 gallons.)