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# OPINION

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Monday

## Legislator tackles Colorado's water issues

In Colorado, water is our most precious natural resource, and eastern Colorado has numerous water concerns that have been exacerbated as a result of the recent drought. As your member of Congress, I have worked to address water issues throughout the district.

**On the Front Range:** Since 1957, the local Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District has been responsible for maintaining facilities for the Federal Bureau of Reclamation that divert water from the headwaters of the Colorado River to the Northern Front Range. This conservancy district has proven to be a faithful steward of operation, maintenance and administration of the conveyance facilities.

This is one of the largest and most complex water distribution systems in the nation. The system is vital because it provides drinking, irrigation and recreational waters. Without this water system, many cities and small towns in Northern Colorado could not exist.

However, to perform even simple, regular maintenance, conservancy district management must take extra time and work through needless paperwork to satisfy oversight from federal officials.

In November 2005, I succeeded in passing a bill in the House to transfer control of this water infrastructure from federal authorities to local management. This transfer will allow the local managers to more cost-effectively manage the facility and avoid the burdensome bureaucracy of the federal government.

Specifically, the titles to the St. Vrain Supply Canal, Boulder Creek Supply Canal and the South Platte Supply Canal will be transferred. These are part of the larger Colorado-Big Thompson Project, which diverts 260,000 acre-feet of water annually from the Colorado River.

**In the north:** The South Platte River has struggled to supply all the water needs of the region during the recent dry years. Lack of water has been devastating to the livelihood of the farmers as well as the surrounding rural communities that rely on agriculture. The

**Marilyn  
Musgrave**  
Guest  
columnist



**In the north:** The South Platte River has struggled to supply all the water needs of the region during the recent dry years. Lack of water has been devastating to the livelihood of the farmers as well as the surrounding rural communities that rely on agriculture. The Front Range communities are growing at a record pace and, out of necessity, are turning thirsty eyes toward the water flowing through the eastern plains.

While Coloradans are suffering because of the lack of water, federal regulations have imposed additional demands on water for conservation habitat for fish and birds.

On the Platte River in Nebraska, the whooping crane, piping plover, interior least tern and the pallid sturgeon are listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. This federal species recovery program mandates higher flows downstream to comply with Endangered Species Act habitat requirements.

For years, Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming have been working on a basin-wide approach to resolving endangered species issues. The financial costs to each state will be huge, and how it will be paid has not been determined. However, you can be sure that Colorado taxpayers will be paying that bill. Instead of using the water for Coloradans, government officials will be confiscating the water for these endangered species and asking our citizens to foot the bill to do it.

Rather than relying on the abysmal species recovery record of the 33-year-old Endangered Species Act, I am supporting reforms, and I have co-sponsored the Threatened and Endangered Species Recovery Act of 2005. This bill places a new emphasis on recovery with new recovery teams and recovery tools, and it replaces the critical habitat program with a more integrated recovery planning process.

**In the central plains:** In 1988, Kansas sued Nebraska and Colorado for injury due to overuse of the water on the Republican River which flows through the three states. The final settlement of the Republican River Compact lawsuit in 2002 set the amount of water that must cross the border into Kansas from our state. This means Colorado irrigators in the watershed region will need to retire land irrigated by surface or ground water to comply with the legal agreement and reduce their use of water.

To achieve compliance, the Colorado General Assembly created the Republican River Water Conservation District. This district has taxed itself to provide money needed to pay for the retirement of irrigated acres. Additionally, the district hopes to use two federal programs through the U.S. Department of Agriculture to assist with the funding. The Environmental Quality Incentive Program uses funds to convert irrigated acres to dry land for various periods of time. Also, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program retires water rights and converts irrigated farmland to grassland for the 15-year life of the contract.

*Rep. Marilyn Musgrave represents Colorado's 4th Congressional District.*