

Water Resources and Agriculture Review Committee

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Committee Charge

The recently renamed Water Resources and Agriculture Review Committee (WRARC) was created to contribute to and monitor the conservation, use, development, and financing of Colorado's water resources for the general welfare of the state (Section 37-98-102, C.R.S.). The committee is also required to review Colorado agriculture issues and statewide planning for water resources. The WRARC reviews and proposes legislation to further its purpose. In conducting its review, the WRARC consults with experts in the field of water conservation, quality, use, finance, and development. The WRARC was authorized to meet up to eight times in 2022 and to take two field trips.

Committee Activities

During the 2022 interim, the WRARC held three meetings and took one field trip to the Colorado Water Congress in Steamboat Springs. The WRARC met with a broad range of water users and government officials, including local water providers, water policy experts, state water planners, and concerned citizens. The committee received briefings on a variety of topics around agricultural resiliency, water quality, and the Colorado Water Plan. The committee also drafted legislation related to making the Water Resources and Agriculture Review committee a year-round committee and creating a task force to look at high-altitude water storage.

Field trips. In August, the committee attended the Colorado Water Congress summer conference in Steamboat Springs and toured Denver Water Headquarters. Denver Water staff gave legislators and committee staff a tour of the newly built headquarters building in Denver, and the committee heard from Denver Water leadership. At Colorado Water Congress, the committee held a public meeting to hear presentations from water experts. Committee members and staff also attended presentations about forest health, municipal water conservation, the Colorado River, and other topics.

Aging infrastructure and economic resiliency in agriculture. Panelists from the Colorado State Conservation Board, Gunnison Basin Roundtable, and the Colorado Department of Agriculture, spoke to the committee about the impacts of aging infrastructure and how agriculture relies on water to be economically resilient. The panelists discussed the need for consistent funding and technical assistance across the state.

Airborne snowpack measurement. Airborne Snow Observatories, Inc., the Colorado Airborne Snow Measurement Program (CASM), and the Dolores Water Conservation District updated the committee on their efforts to measure snow water equivalent using airborne snowpack measurement. They demonstrated how the technology maps snowpack and provided examples of how Colorado would benefit from increased use of airborne measurement. CASM provided a timeline for funding and building out a flight program to measure snowpack in all of Colorado's headwaters.

Colorado-Big Thompson Project. Two separate panels discussed the Colorado-Big Thompson project. The first panel, with the mayor of Grand Lake and representatives from Three Lakes Watershed Association and the Outstanding Grand Lake Foundation, discussed the water quality and clarity of the Three Lakes system and how these are negatively affected by the Colorado-Big Thompson transmountain diversion. The second panel, with Grand County, the Bureau of Reclamation, and Northern Water, discussed the history of water quality management in the Three Lakes system, including the stakeholders involved and the more recent impacts of large wildfires.

Colorado Water Plan. The committee heard an update from the Colorado Water Conservation Board about revisions to the Colorado Water Plan and outreach on the revisions.

Emerging water technologies. Researchers from the University of Colorado Boulder and Colorado State University presented to the committee on their work resulting from [House Bill 21-1268](#), which authorized the universities to conduct feasibility studies and deploy pilot projects to improve the monitoring, management, conservation, and allocation of water. The researchers interviewed and surveyed stakeholders to identify important challenges in the monitoring and management of Colorado water, and discussed the case studies they identified that provide examples of emerging water technologies.

Non-tributary water resources. Stewart Environmental Consulting Group told the committee about the possibility of treating non-tributary water from mining, oil and gas, and agricultural operations. The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission spoke about produced water and the challenges of treating and recycling it in oil and gas operations.

Per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). The committee heard presentations about PFAS in biosolids and the recent changes in Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) health advisories for drinking water for PFAS chemicals. Vranesh and Raisch, Roxborough Water and Sanitation District, and Centennial Water and Sanitation District discussed the presence of PFAS in biosolids, a product of the domestic wastewater treatment process. The panelists told the committee about potential disposal options and the possibility for beneficial reuse of biosolids. Staff from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment discussed the updated EPA PFAS health advisories. They informed the committee about the department's response to EPA's recommendations and the effects of PFAS in drinking water.

Soil health. The Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA) and the National Center for Appropriate Technology provided the committee with an overview of soil health and its importance to Colorado's agricultural sector. The Colorado State Conservation Board in CDA shared information on the STAR Program – Saving Tomorrow's Agricultural Resources – to help producers set and assess progress towards soil health goals. The National Center for Appropriate Technology discussed their Soil for Water Program and educated the committee on the nexus of healthy soils and water flow and cycling.

Stream rehabilitation. The committee heard from River Science, Audubon Rockies, and two water conservancy districts on the issue of degraded streams in Colorado. Presenters discussed the value of beaver dams and beaver dam analogs, and they noted ways in which restoring healthy streams can improve water quality and resiliency. The Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District presented on the Van Norman Project and noted their concerns about injuring water rights during the stream restoration process.

Water Education Colorado. Water Education Colorado provided the committee with an update on the organization's recent activities, including water leadership programs, river basin tours and other educational opportunities, public outreach campaigns, youth engagement, and news and publications.

Watershed restoration. Northern Water, the city of Greeley, and Grand County presented to the committee about watershed restoration after the Cameron Peak and East Troublesome wildfires. They discussed their specific restoration projects, the outreach and partnerships required to undertake restoration work, and the need for continued funding.

Xeriscaping. The committee heard from a number of proponents of xeriscaping and policies to protect homeowners' ability to install drought-tolerant landscaping, particularly in homeowners associations.

Committee Recommendations

As a result of committee discussion and deliberation, the WRARC recommends the following two bills for consideration in the 2023 legislative session.

Bill A – *Task Force on High Altitude Water Storage.* Bill A creates a task force to study the feasibility of implementing water storage in the form of snow in high-altitude areas. The six-member task force includes engineers, state legislators, representatives from the recreation industry, and a representative from the U.S. Forest Service. The task force must meet at least once every three months in FY 2023-24, work with stakeholders across Colorado, and prepare a final report to the WRARC.

Bill B – *Water Resources and Agriculture Review Committee.* Bill B changes the WRARC from an interim committee to a year-round committee. The year-round committee must meet a minimum of four times each year. Bill B also removes the limit on the number of annual field trips the committee may take.