

Drought means water restrictions may be on tap for summer

By Jeanne Davant

A dry winter and early spring, and the possibility of a hotter and dryer-than-usual summer, could mean that Manitouans will face water restrictions this year.

The city's water consultant, Ann Nichols, told Manitou Springs City Council on Tuesday that the lack of snow on Pikes Peak has slowed the flow in French Creek, a major source of Manitou's water supply, to well below historic levels. As a result, the water level in Manitou Reservoir has dropped.

What's more, low water flow in Fountain Creek, except for a brief period after the rainfall on April 13 and 14, has prevented Manitou from being able to import water from Pueblo Reservoir.

Evaporation generally lowers the water level in Manitou Reservoir by about 1.2 feet per year, Nichols reported. In a normal or wet year, Manitou draws upon water resources it has rights to under the Frying Pan-Arkansas (Fry-Ark) Project, an agreement that brings water from the Western Slope to Colorado Springs, Manitou and other southeastern Colorado municipalities.

Manitou's Fry-Ark water is stored in Pueblo Reservoir, but low stream-flow conditions on Fountain Creek preclude exchanges of Fry-Ark water to keep Manitou's reservoir full.

The Fry-Ark Project is part of a complex network of agreements that governs Manitou's water supply.

Under these agreements, the city is legally obligated to keep the reservoir at a certain level. When the reservoir drops below that level because of evaporation or greater-than-normal demand during a drought, Manitou is legally obligated to refill it.

"If the current stream flow conditions persist, we would not be able to cover ... evaporation with exchanges, as we have the past several years," Nichols said. "I think exchanges are going to be rare unless it rains a whole lot. Once you draw down the reservoir, getting it full again is not going to be an easy task."

Manitou has a separate conveyance agreement with Colorado Springs Utilities for delivery of Fry-Ark water through a cross-connection with CSU's Homestake and North Slope systems. Nichols said that agreement would allow Manitou to get additional water if it can't access the water through normal channels.

"We do have that right if they have the capacity, but it's sort of expensive," Nichols said. "I have had one brief conversation with CSU. They thought it was probably likely at times during this summer that we would have to ask them to deliver water to us through the cross-connection."

Manitou imposed water restrictions during the drought in 2002-03.

"This will be the first time we've had what looks to be water shortages when we've had the ability to do exchanges," Nichols said. "It's going to be a learning process."

Nichols urged Council to start thinking about these conditions, possible water restrictions and a policy for asking CSU to convey water to Manitou.

Mayor Marc Snyder scheduled a work session May 10 to discuss these issues and suggested that adjustments to water rates could be considered as well as water restrictions.

[Return to Article Index](#)