

Candidates differ on water

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By Joe Hanel | *Herald Denver Bureau*

DENVER - Ask either of the major candidates for governor about water, and he'll start by saying he grew up on a farm.

Republican Bob Beauprez's family had a dairy farm with "a very junior water right," he says, while Democrat Bill Ritter says times were even harder for him - his family leased a half-section wheat field with no water rights at all.

In a way, the rivals' biographies reflect the stark reality of Colorado agriculture: Neither farm exists anymore. Beauprez converted his farm into a golf course and subdivision. Ritter's mother had to sell her land when the well dried up. A storage unit and shopping mall now occupy the land.

Colorado lost 2.5 million acres of agricultural land between 1987 and 2002, according to a March 2006 study by Environment Colorado. And farms will be especially pressured as Coloradans struggle for water over the next 25 years. By 2030, the state's current water resources will meet only 80 percent of its needs, according to the Statewide Water Supply Initiative, a 2004 study.

Whoever wins the Nov. 7 election will inherit this tricky problem. The two candidates share many of the same solutions, but they differ on how quickly they want to build new reservoirs.

Conserve or build?

Both say the solution starts with more conservation, and both say new storage will be necessary. But Beauprez is quicker to talk about the need for reservoirs, while Ritter emphasizes strict conservation, reuse and contracts for sharing water with farmers.

"We can expand existing reservoirs where possible and build new reservoirs when necessary," Beauprez told the Colorado Water Congress in Breckenridge on Aug. 25.

Ritter countered with a warning about growth.

"If you're talking about water, you have to look at the prospect of unprecedented growth taking place on the Front Range," Ritter said.

The 2004 water study predicts that 2 million new people will move to the South Platte Basin by 2030. The Western Slope will see even higher growth rates. Statewide, the population is expected to increase 65 percent, to 7.1 million by 2030.

Ritter points to Denver's successful response to the 2002 drought, when customers dramatically cut their water use and have kept it far below pre-drought levels through this year.

Ghost of Referendum A

Ritter hammers Beauprez for supporting 2003's Referendum A, a \$2 billion bond for water projects that was soundly defeated by voters. The referendum's failure forced cities to get serious about conservation, Ritter said, an effort he pledged to continue.

"The governor can be part of creating an ethic of water conservation," Ritter said.

Western Slope residents worried that Ref. A could have led to a "water grab" by Front Range cities.

"I think at most it was unnecessary, and at worst it was a threat to West Slope water," said state Sen. Jim Isgar, D-Hesperus, a Ritter supporter.

But Beauprez's campaign manager, John Marshall, said the water grab issue is a "red herring." The state can meet its needs without transferring water from one basin to another, he said.

Beauprez emphasizes the idea. "The point is, we don't need to steal anybody's water. We just need to slow it down before it leaves here every spring," Beauprez said.

Colorado doesn't use all the water it can under its agreements with other states. Beauprez says the state can store up to an additional 1 million acre feet, which would bridge the gap the 2004 statewide study predicted. Ritter talks about storage only after the state has made the most of the water it already has. In wet years, Ritter says, water engineers can inject excess water into the Front Range aquifers for use in dry times.

Differing views on expertise

Fred Kroeger, president of the Southwestern Water Conservation District and a Beauprez supporter, emphasizes the need for the state to spend money on storage, especially on the La Plata River.

"There are a couple of sites out there that are quite favorable (for storage), but there seems to be no money to take care of them," Kroeger said. "I think Beauprez has got more experience on this than the other gentleman, and that should be useful."

Isgar, however, says Ritter knows his water. Isgar was "really impressed" by Ritter's command of the issue and his ability to speak off-the-cuff before the Colorado Water Congress.

Global warming debate

Ritter also told the Water Congress he would have his advisers keep a close eye on global warming. The National Academies of Science report the Earth is hotter now than any time in the last 400 years.

"It can impact our snow pack. It can impact our rainfall. It can impact a whole host of issues," Ritter said.

Marshall ridiculed the idea.

"Decades-long trends on a global scale are something we oughta look at," he said, but farmers have immediate needs.

The governor's role

The governor has a say in water policy in several ways, said Doug Kemper, executive director of the Colorado Water Congress.

First, he can appoint the director of the Department of Natural Resources, who oversees the state departments that deal with water on a daily basis. The governor also has a say in getting adequate funding to those departments, Kemper said.

"There certainly is heavy influence on the budget process and priorities that get set," he said.

Finally, the governor will inherit the new water roundtables, set up by an Isgar bill in 2005 to look for ways to address the state's water future.

"It will remain to be seen whether they get a mission that's defined," Kemper said. "The leadership that comes out of the governor's office will be crucial to whether that process succeeds."

Both Beauprez and Ritter have expressed support for the roundtables.

Ritter added that he would make sure his appointees to the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission understand the importance of protecting water quality. Beauprez said regulators need to be cautious of water quality, but he said he was pleased with the protections in place for gas drilling.

"I think on balance we've done a pretty good job in this state," Beauprez said.

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