Denver and West Slope share oil-shale water concerns

By Guest Columnist
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By Deborah ‘Debbie’ Ortega and Allyn Harvey

It is not often that we find common ground across the Rockies on issues that affect our friends and neighbors. We sometimes think of issues as “ours” or “theirs,” though many issues transcend the mountains.

Communities and local businesses across our state depend on clean, abundant water from the Colorado River Basin. There is no greater reminder of that fact than the current drought and the resulting economic impacts we are facing.

It is with those challenges in mind that people in communities from the Western Slope to the Front Range — such as Carbondale, New Castle, Rifle, Grand Junction, Thornton and Denver — support a balanced, commonsense approach to oil shale that requires research prior to commercial leasing of taxpayer-owned land in the West.

Oil shale development could pose a significant risk to the health of our rivers and the availability of water for agriculture, drinking supplies and local businesses. We need to know the risks ahead of any commercial development.

Energy development in our state has always been a significant economic driver, but it must still work in concert with our other job-creating industries that rely on their fair share of the water supply. Impacts to our water sources could affect the livelihoods of millions of residents in every corner of our state.

The technology to make oil shale viable still has not been developed. Since commercial technology does not yet exist, there is no possible way to know the impacts, especially on our water, that would accompany full-scale oil-shale development. All of us have a right to know the facts, so that municipalities, farmers and ranchers, as well as tourism and outdoor recreation businesses that depend on healthy rivers and safe drinking water supplies can plan and make wise decisions.

Some have suggested that development will not use much water, and others say it will take too much. The only thing we know for sure is that we don’t know for sure.

The Government Accountability Office reviewed a wide range of estimates that found that industrial-scale oil shale development would require as much as 140 percent of the amount of water Denver Water provides each year (or as much as a city 30 times the size of Grand Junction would use).

There are also those who say that investing public land and water in oil shale will provide a worthwhile return in jobs on the Western Slope and energy for our nation. We hope they are right. We don’t know that for sure either. But we have 100 years of promises and a dismal record of failure with projects such as the Exxon Colony Project, which devastated the local economy after laying off more than 2,000 workers when it closed down on “Black Sunday,”
May 2, 1982.

No good investor would put money into a venture without first seeing the books. The Bureau of Land Management’s new plan does just that by requiring oil shale companies to do the research first, so we know just how much water would be needed and what the impacts to water quality would be, before going forward with commercial leasing.

Our neighbors in Arizona and Nevada have also asked that we know the impacts to water — particularly the Colorado River — prior to commercial development.

It was former Denver Water Manager Chips Barry — often heralded by those on both sides of the divide for bringing people together — who cited concerns that industrial-scale oil-shale development could prevent Colorado from fulfilling its obligations to downstream users. In 2009, he told The Denver Post, “That is a risk not only for Denver Water but for the entire state.”

More than 100 business leaders, recreation organizations, farmers, ranchers and others asked the BLM to ensure that Colorado water is protected. Sportsmen have cautioned that reduced stream flows will negatively impact fish and the region’s outdoor-dependent economy. These businesses depend on healthy rivers and safe water supplies. We cannot afford to gamble the backbone of our economy without fully understanding the risk that oil shale poses to it.

We have much to offer here in the West. People come to our communities to visit, and sometimes they stay and call it home, largely because of our big skies and outdoor recreation.

We are all concerned about the potential impact on existing water rights throughout the Colorado River Basin once oil shale companies begin to exercise the senior rights they hold. In a worst-case scenario, this could turn the West Slope into an industrial zone, ruin the Colorado River and threaten drinking water supplies on both sides of the Continental Divide.

As local officials, our responsibility is to ensure safe, healthy drinking water for our residents and a healthy community. With that in mind, both of our municipalities have taken positions supporting a cautious approach to oil shale.

Given that a commercial industry does not yet exist, it is just smart planning to require that research of oil-shale technologies be completed first and impacts fully analyzed before moving forward with a commercial leasing program, as the federal plan suggests. That is an approach that puts the health of our water and the future of our communities first, to ensure that communities on both sides of the Rockies — and our entire region — continue to thrive.

Debbie Ortega is a coal miner’s daughter with family in the oil and gas industry on the West Slope. She serves on the Denver City Council and sponsored the City Council proclamation endorsing the BLM position on oil shale leasing.

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