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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

ROBB REPORTS
WATER RESOURCE LEGISLATION
Rep. Jim Robb (R-Delta and Mesa Counties)

If forecasts about energy development in northwestern Colorado are accurate, the next twenty years will see drastic changes in the Western Slope water picture.

Production of just 400,000 barrels of shale oil a day by the end of this century, a low estimate by the Colorado Energy Research Institute, would require 81,000 acre feet of water each year. If the shale industry grows to 900,000 barrels a day, it will use 185,000 acre feet a year; 1.8 million barrel a day production will need 384,000 acre feet annually.

What does this mean for us on the Western Slope? Tighter water supplies. The energy companies have researched many ways of conserving water, from intensive recycling to huge ditches funneling water from the Missouri River Basin. But the fact remains that as the shale industry grows so will water use, and Colorado only has so much water.

Of the 15 million acre feet produced in our State during an average year, we can keep about one-half for use in Colorado -- 7,375,000 acre feet. The rest is committed to downstream states by water compact. But although Western Slope water prices continue to rise, Colorado doesn't keep the entire 7.4 million acre feet it is entitled to. We let about 1.8 million acre-feet run downstream to Utah, California, Nevada and Arizona because we don't have the reservoirs to hold it; we let almost 25% of our water slip away. Energy development will raise the price of water rights and could cause agricultural water users to sell their water and land. If we want to prevent this, we must act now.
The answer to this dilemma lies in increased storage; the great majority of our water comes in winter and a large part of the spring runoff escapes downstream because we can't hold it back.

To begin to remedy this situation, I co-sponsored three water bills during the past legislative session, all three designed to increase storage, keeping some of the water we're entitled to.

Senate Bill 19 creates the Colorado Water Resources and Power Development Authority to pursue the study and construction of major water impoundment projects in Colorado. This authority will be empowered to issue bonds to finance projects that it originates. With a governing body experienced in engineering, financing, planning and developing water projects, the water resource authority should facilitate development of crucial water projects throughout the State.

Senate Bill 439 contains funding for several small water resource and flood control facilities, among them some on the Western Slope. Of perhaps more importance is funding for feasibility studies on two oil-shale-connected water projects in northwestern Colorado -- the Una dam and reservoir on the Colorado River upstream of Debeque and Yellowjacket dam, designed to divert or store water from the White River above its confluence with Piceance Creek.

Senate Bill 510 expands the authority of the Colorado River District. The Colorado River System is the source of almost half of the State's yearly water allotment -- an estimated 3 million acre feet. And of this total only about 1.5 million acre feet were used in 1977; the rest was allowed to flow south out of the State. S.B. 510 enables the district to finance water projects on the Colorado and should encourage expansion of impoundment facilities on the river.
The need for these bills is underscored by what appears to be decreasing federal involvement in major western water projects. Interior Secretary James Watt has committed himself to completion of the Tucson leg of the Central Arizona Project, a diversion facility that will take water from the lower Colorado River. Although the Reagan administration is committed to building water resource projects, Watt himself may have forecast a less certain future recently when he said, "the first priority, of course, is to bring about economic recovery. We've got to bring inflation under control. We've got to reduce federal spending. These things are going to have an impact on all water resource development." Although 1983 Interior Department budget cuts did not affect water resource development, President Reagan is currently seeking 1982 cuts. Those reductions could have some affect on western water projects, Watt said.

State planning for water, as a result, has become a critical priority for the State legislature and one we will follow closely in the coming session which opens in January.

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