DENVER, COLO. -- U.S. Sen. Bill Armstrong (R-Colo.) today called for a conference of Upper Basin States to confer on critical western water resource issues.

Citing recent federal court decisions and other federal actions as threatening to the western states' water rights system, Armstrong recommended that members of congress, governors, state legislators and water interests from the Upper Colorado River Basin states meet in a conference to iron out common positions. There are seven states in the Colorado River Basin -- Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico are the Upper Basin States. California, Arizona and Nevada are the Lower Basin States.

Speaking before the Colorado Water Congress annual meeting, Armstrong asked the members to consider issuing the call for such a conference and to serve as the organizing committee.

"Court decisions on the application of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Section 404 permits have gone far beyond the original purposes envisioned by Congress," Armstrong said. "If these recent court rulings stand, the basic western water right system is in jeopardy." Armstrong was referring to the Riverside v. Andrews case which for the first time applied federal permit requirements to water quantity rather than water quality. This decision, if allowed to stand,
would in effect give the federal government unasked for authority to take water rights owned by individuals, farmers, ranchers and communities.

Armstrong also mentioned court cases striking down states' ability to control the export of water; adverse federal agency rulings on Colorado projects now under construction; rulings under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act affecting irrigation ditches; and water project funding as important topics for an Upper Basin conference agenda.

On other water issues, Armstrong told the Colorado Water Congress that his legislation on Colorado River salinity problems is co-sponsored by all Senators from the seven Colorado River Basin states and supported by the Colorado River Salinity Control Forum which represents the states. Salinity Control Forum members have worked closely with the Administration and have reached an accord on several points that were under discussion. Armstrong said the next step is action in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee and he would push for movement with help from the other Senate co-sponsors.

Armstrong also reported that his resolution citing 1984 as the "Year of Water" has been co-sponsored by 34 Senators and has been favorably reported from the Senate Judiciary Committee. "This is a symbol," Armstrong said, "but it will help focus on the critical water issues facing the nation. If we conclude the 'Year of Water' with an Upper Basin conference, we can forge a powerful alliance to meet our regional water needs."
Armstrong delivered his remarks during the Wayne Aspinall Memorial Luncheon at the Colorado Water Congress meeting. Armstrong began his speech by recalling advice the late Congressman had given in 1971 to western water interests and he noted that Aspinall's comments are still an accurate guide for western water issues.