IN THE WEST

OREGON: Tempered in the drought-stricken Klamath Basin last summer when the Klamath Irrigation Project was managed, in part, to protect endangered fish and some farmers went without water. Since then, a draft 10-year management plan for the Project has called for more water for irrigation, leaving fish high and dry. And a National Academy of Sciences’ review of the crisis concluded that poor water quality may undercut efforts to restore endangered fish.

Wyoming: In 1986, Wyoming created a process for legally protecting water instream but the process remains difficult and time-consuming. Landowners who choose to leave some water in a stream endure studies and applications, plus they must surrender ownership of that portion of their water right to the State. Staff with the Wyoming Water Project is working to simplify this process so that water right holders have the freedom and flexibility to do what they want with their water.

Utah: Throughout the West, dam owners release water to flush trapped sediment downstream. A recent silt dump on the Logan River in Utah killed thousands of fish and buried spawning habitat in one of Utah’s premiere fisheries. In response, the Utah Water Project and TU volunteers investigated this and other sluicing events in one of Utah’s premiere fisheries. In response, the Utah Water Project and TU volunteers investigated this and other sluicing events.

In January, Trout Unlimited’s Colorado Water Project released a report detailing the stress that Colorado’s rivers and streams are beginning to show due to overuse. According to “A Dry Legacy: The Challenge for Colorado’s Rivers,” the draining of state waterways is a problem that will only get worse as the population continues to grow.

The report used ten cases studies to show how divisions, damming, and the expanding demand for water are damaging Colorado’s river. The case studies detailed varying impacts caused by reduced or altered flows, including fish kills, degraded water quality, reduced wildlife habitat and affected recreational opportunities — impacts that have far-reaching economic, social, and quality of life impacts. The case studies look at only a subset of rivers and streams that are showing signs of stress. The CO Division of Wildlife lists more than 570 waterways that are limited by low and fluctuating stream flows.

Several factors are at the root of the problem, according to the report, including the overuse of water — a limited resource in semiarid Colorado — due to irrigation, power generation, municipal consumption and even recreational uses like snowmaking.

It faulted Colorado’s 19th century system of water laws for allowing such overuse. The system has not evolved to address the state’s rapid growth and the resulting impacts on rivers and streams. The report also faulted the State for its reluctance to use the limited authority available under current law to protect stream flows.

“Some of the state’s water laws are so archaic that the senior holder of a water right, who chooses not to use his or her entire water allocation in order to protect fish and wildlife habitat or water quality, can lose all or part of that right. This, in turn, creates a huge and very powerful disincentive to conserve water,” said Bill Gordon, a rancher from South Park who supports stronger instream flow protection.

The report follows a major study released last month by the University of Colorado Natural Resources Law Center, which concluded that unfettered demand for water in the state due to continued growth along the Front Range and on the Western Slope will exceed currently available water supplies.

The TU report includes a series of strategies that will help restore stressed rivers and streams and prevent others from incurring similar harm, such as making better use of the limited protections under Colorado law, borrowing strategies from other western states, and aggressively protecting rivers that are still in good shape. In addition, individuals can help by:

- Reducing water use at home by using less water intensive yard plants, installing low-flow fixtures and appliances, and promptly repairing leaks.
- Getting involved with a local organization doing river restoration or protection, such as a Trout Unlimited chapter or watershed group.
- And working with state groups to support reforms to Colorado’s water system, such as a bill allowing private individuals to convert existing diversions into streamflow uses.

“Fortunately there are common sense solutions to this pending environmental crisis. It’s just a matter of summoning the courage and the political will,” said Melinda Kassen, director of the Colorado Water Project.

“A Dry Legacy” is available electronically at www.cotrou.org, at public libraries throughout Colorado, and by contacting Megan Braut in the Boulder office at mbraut@tu.org.

Financial contributions to the Colorado Water Project are tax deductible and greatly appreciated. Please make checks payable to Trout Unlimited and mail them to the project office at 1966 13th St., #1160, Boulder, CO, 80302. Questions? Contact Melinda Kassen at (303)440-2937, or mkassen@tu.org.
In February, the Natural Resources Conservation Service reported that Colorado’s statewide snowpack was at its lowest mid-winter level in two decades.

NRCS projects that most Colorado river basins have less than an 8% probability of reaching average snowpack by the end of the winter snows.

Keeping current

INSIDE: Colorado’s Dry Legacy

TU Report chronicles the draining of state rivers

NEWS FROM THE WESTERN WATER PROJECT

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KEEPING CURRENT is a publication of the Western Water Project, a joint initiative of Trout Unlimited and WaterWatch of Oregon. The mission of the Project is to work primarily at the state level in decisions affecting water allocation and water quality. The Project seeks to restore and maintain streamflows for healthy coldwater fisheries and increase meaningful participation in these decisions.