

Water woes among top voter concerns in the West

BY KAYLA YOUNG | EDITOR

Concern over water conservation and management for the first time rivals unemployment in the minds of voters in the West, according to recent data released by the Colorado College State of the Rockies Project.

The study polled 400 voters each from Arizona, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, all which indicated water as a major concern for the state.

Overall, four in five voters indicated "inadequate water supplies" were a serious problem, while half ranked the issue as very or extremely serious. Since 2012, the percent of voters that find inadequate water supplies to be a serious issue has grown 5 percent to 80 percent total.

When compared side-by-side with unemployment, water worries stand out as a hot issue for voters. In the 2015 study, 53 percent polled found low levels of water in rivers to be extremely or very serious, compared to 46 percent regarding unemployment. In 2014, these numbers were at 50 percent and 54 percent, respectively.

Lori Weigel, a pollster and partner

with Public Opinion Strategies, said that while concern is most acute in southern states like Arizona and New Mexico, interest has increased across the region on this vital resource.

"We've really seen a growing recognition in our state (Colorado) that supplies are limited, even if we are not at any one time technically in a drought," Weigel said. "We still live in a climate where water is going to be a concern and have seen a strong sense that water conservation is important, especially on the Front Range."

Water quality also ranked as a leading reason for residing in the West, Weigel said.

"We asked people to tell us some of the factors on why they decided to live and stay in West. It was kind of surprising to me: clean air, clean water and environment," she said, indicating that pollsters had anticipated greater importance given

to economic factors.

In Colorado, 90 percent pointed to the clean environment as a reason for living in the state, while 85 percent overall selected the factor as a reason for their place of residence.

The finding coincides with another in the study, indicating Western voters prefer water conservation over further diversions to address demand.

In Colorado, 74 percent chose "using our current water supply more wisely, by encouraging more water conservation, reducing use, and increasing recycling of water," compared to 16 percent of voters that preferred "diverting more water from rivers in less populated areas of the state to communities where more people live."

In Utah, 79 percent chose the first option and 14 percent chose the second. In Wyoming, the poll was split 74 percent to 19 percent.

Weigel said the poll sends a clear indicator to politicians on the priorities of Western voters.

"What they would tell state leaders on water is resounding," she said. "They are telling us it's important as a factor in why they are living in the West." ♦

Importance of inadequate water supplies

ARIZONA

Serious - 87%
Extremely/very serious - 58%

COLORADO

Serious - 78%
Extremely/very serious - 48%

MONTANA

Serious - 44%
Extremely/very serious - 17%

NEW MEXICO

Serious - 85%
Extremely/very serious - 62%

UTAH

Serious - 85%
Extremely/very serious - 62%

WYOMING

Serious - 46%
Extremely/very serious - 20%