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Basin Implementation Plans are being Updated – What are Agriculture's Priorities?

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River Basins around the state have started working on updating their Basin Implementation Plans (BIPs). A Basin Implementation Plan describes current and future water goals and identifies the projects, policies, and processes necessary to reach them.

Colorado's Water Plan reflects the goals and priorities specified in the basin implementation plans. Funding from the state and the individual basins is then directed toward 'identified projects and processes' that advance implementation of the described needs.

The first Basin Implementation Plans were developed by Basin Roundtables in 2015 in conjunction with the development of the statewide water plan. Each of Colorado's eight major river basins plus the Denver metropolitan area have Basin Roundtables – which are comprised of stakeholders that represent all water interests within a basin, including agricultural, municipal and industrial, recreational and conservation interests.



Center pivot irrigation on the Colorado River. Photo: Phil Brink

Basin Implementation Plan (BIP) goals are determined by needs within a basin. Water-related projects - also called Identified Projects and Processes or IPPs - are identified by water stakeholders throughout the basin and brought to the Basin Roundtable for review and potential inclusion in the BIP update. For example, the Colorado River BIP update is looking at IPPs that include storage, stream flow enhancement and low flow salinity issues, senior water right protection, drought contingency, ditch lining and conservation easement funding.

Earlier this year, the Colorado Water Conservation Board hired Brown and Caldwell, an environmental consulting firm, to serve as the general contractor leading the BIP update process statewide. Brown and Caldwell then coordinated with the Basin Roundtables to identify and hire 'local experts' for each basin. Each local expert assists its Basin Roundtable in

developing its BIP update. In the Rio Grande Basin for example, staff from the Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project will serve as the local expert. Local experts may also help update the state water plan.

The BIP update process includes outreach sessions to gather input and project lists from water stakeholders. A proposed project requires some core information and an estimated cost – which can come from the project proponent or other sources. Additionally, the Colorado Water Conservation Board has developed a new online cost estimating tool that can be used for a variety of different project types.

Basin goals & priorities guide how future water funding is allocated.

Each submitted project is sorted into ‘tiers’ based on its projected timeline for implementation and how well the project aligns with the priorities described in the updated BIP and the state water plan. If a project will occur within an area where a local water plan - such as a watershed or stream management plan - exists, it will also be assigned a ‘tier’ or score based on how well it supports the local plan goals. Additionally, the amount of supporting data accompanying a project submission will also be reviewed and the project will be assigned a tier based on completeness.



BIPs identify where improvements are needed.

Basin priorities are also included in the BIP updates. For example, the 2015 Southwest BIP identified three ag-related priorities: on-farm efficiency, delivery system efficiency, and diversion structure improvement. The 2020 BIP update may include forest health as an additional priority. Other priorities might include watershed management planning, in-stream diversion structure upgrades that enable fish and boat passage, stream flow and riparian enhancement, ag water leasing, municipal water reuse, and aquifer sustainability.

The State Water Plan is also being updated and will be finalized in 2022. The Colorado Water Conservation Board hopes the Basin Roundtables will complete their project lists this month (July). Basin Implementation Plan updates will be completed by late 2021 and each basin’s list of projects and associated costs will be included in the updated state water plan. These numbers will help guide funding allocations for water projects.

Agricultural producers have an outsized stake in the BIP update process, because the completed BIPs lay out both priorities and projects to be funded for the next few years. Future water funding will be directed toward identified goals and projects, so it is important that all agricultural interests voice their priorities and goals for inclusion in their Basin Implementation Plan. A project that aligns with one or more basin priorities and provides multiple stakeholder benefits stands a better chance of getting funded. For more information, visit your basin roundtable website (www.colorado.gov/pacific/cowaterplan/basins).