What do Colorado Agricultural Producers think of Watershed Management Plans?
Results of the Ag Water NetWORK's 2019 survey

1st of a 2-Part Series

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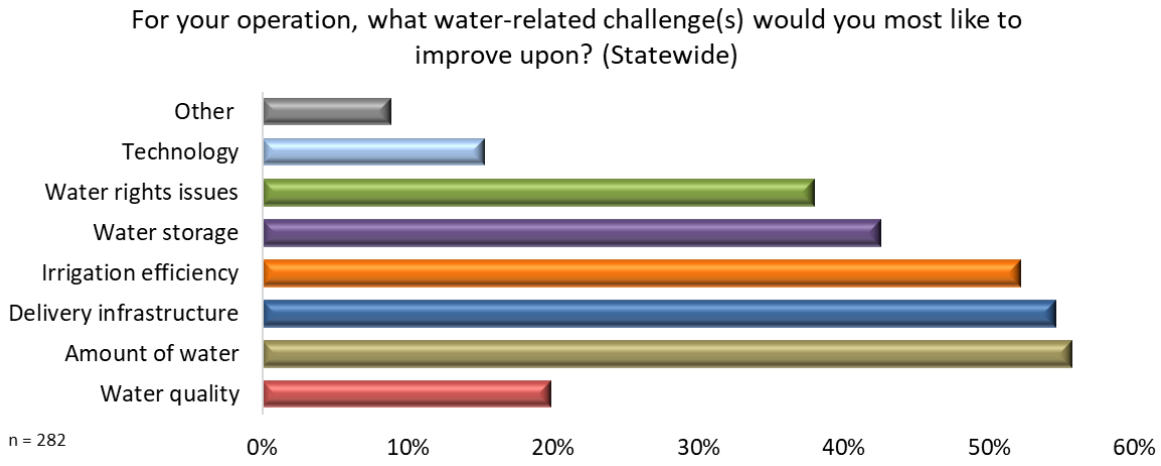
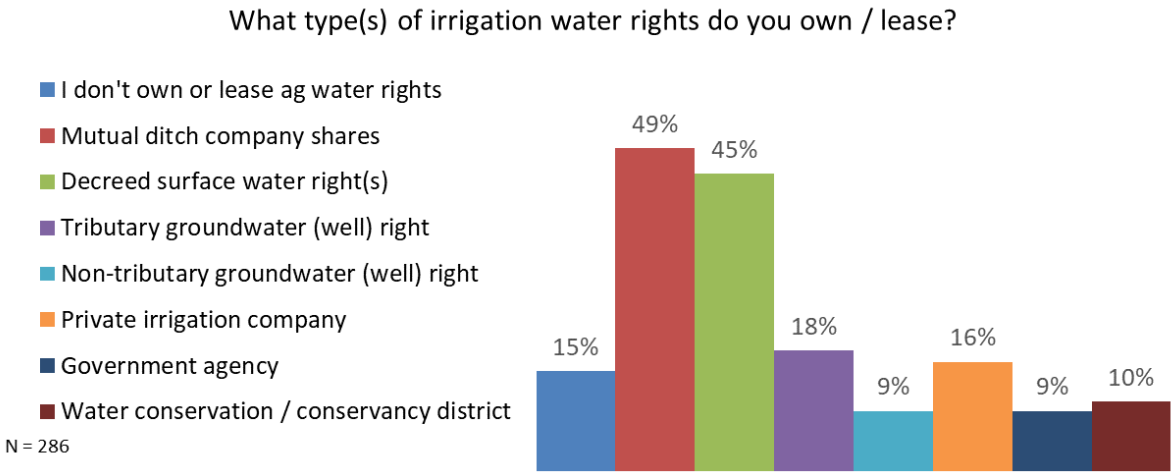
From January through April 2019, the Colorado Cattlemen's Ag Water NetWORK surveyed Colorado agricultural producers to assess their familiarity with the watershed and stream management planning process, and to better understand their needs and priorities related to water. The 15-question survey generated 288 responses from agricultural producers in 56 Colorado counties and represented operations of all sizes. About 84 percent of the respondents owned and/or managed irrigated land and about 16 percent had dryland (non-irrigated) operations.

Roughly half of the respondents said they irrigated between 1 and 250 acres. A third irrigated more than 250 acres, and the rest were dryland operations. The most common water-related challenge - cited by 56 percent of producers - was the amount of water available for irrigation. Irrigators in Colorado need more water than is routinely available. The 2019 Technical Update to the state Water Plan indicates that approximately 80 percent of the overall agricultural diversion demand is being met on a statewide basis. Thus, the gap between irrigation water supply and demand statewide is about 20 percent on average, though it varies by basin. Water storage – which is directly tied to the amount of water available – was considered a challenge by 43 percent of respondents.

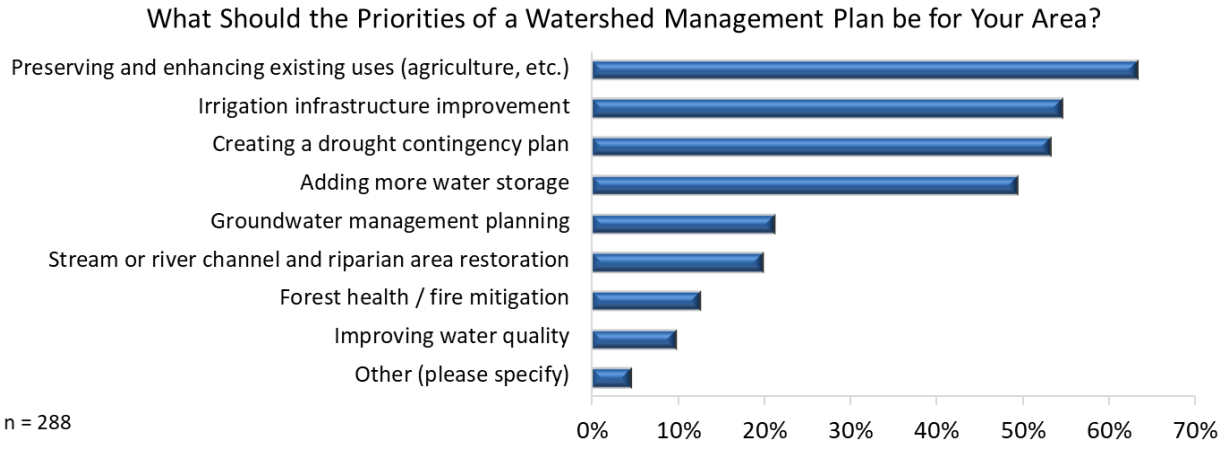


The second and third most common water-related challenges cited were delivery infrastructure and irrigation efficiency. Addressing these two challenges is typically capital intensive and demand for grant and cost-share funding chronically exceeds available financial resources for these activities. Through the watershed and/or stream management planning process, funding for irrigation water diversion and delivery infrastructure and source water protection (fire, flooding) can be obtained from a wider range of sources than is typically available to agriculture as long as projects are multi-benefit in nature. For example, a diversion dam replacement can also incorporate a fish passage and stream channel and embankment improvements, which helps aquatic life, water quality, and irrigators alike. Because the project benefits multiple uses, it can garner more funding and reduce the cost to irrigators.

The graph below shows the types of irrigation water utilized by the survey respondents. Many said they obtained irrigation water from more than once source. About 16 percent of the survey takers were dryland operators only (no irrigation water rights).



What should the priorities of a watershed management plan be? Most producers (63 percent) felt that 'preserving and enhancing existing uses (agriculture, etc.)' should be a priority. This was followed by irrigation infrastructure improvement and creating a drought contingency plan. Adding more water storage was indicated by almost half of the responders. Other recommended priorities included groundwater management planning, river channel and riparian restoration, forest health / fire mitigation and water quality, wetland habitat creation, water leasing and enhancing recreational opportunities. Prioritizing core resources and values within a local watershed management plan helps guide scoping, funding procurement and project implementation.



The collaboration that goes into developing a watershed plan better positions local water users to effectively deal with increased demand in the face of diminished water availability. Watershed planning and implementation can upgrade agriculture irrigation delivery and on-farm infrastructure while improving environmental and recreational conditions and facilitating municipal water security. Part 2 of this article will highlight additional findings from our 2019 survey of agricultural producers across Colorado.