

Whitewater wishes



Whitewater enthusiasts preparing to enter Gore Canyon on the Colorado River head into a stretch of river with expert-only rapids. According to the Colorado River Outfitters Association, the upper Colorado River was one of the few rivers last year to show an increase in use over 2011. Photo Special to the Sentinel/Brad Goettemiller



The Pumphouse Recreation Site on the Colorado River 11 miles south and west of Kremmling is in the middle center of the photo. Proponents of a whitewater park planned for this area recently received a \$500,000 grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board. Photo Special to the Sentinel/Caroline Bradford

By [Dave Buchanan](#)
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A whitewater park planned for the Colorado River near Kremmling received a boost last month when the Colorado Water Conservation Board awarded proponents \$500,000 in construction funds.

While the advent of a public, all-comers whitewater park is good news to boaters, the way the park is being funded equally is worthy of note.

The funds for the boating park planned near the popular Pumphouse Recreation site 11 miles southwest of Kremmling are coming from the CWCB's Water Supply Reserve.

The CWCB has been funding water projects across Colorado to the tune of more than \$39 million since 2007, but according to project coordinator Caroline Bradford, this is the first grant awarded to a recreation-oriented project holding an in-stream water right.

“The big feeling has been that the CWCB has traditionally fought in-stream recreational flow rights,” Bradford said. “But the legislature and the state Supreme Court 15 years ago recognized recreational in-stream use was a beneficial use.”

Bradford called the CWCB’s unanimous approval of the funding a “180-degree shift.”

Grand County manager Lurline Curran, who was instrumental in presenting the county’s case before the CWCB, said the CWCB’s philosophy has “changed along with the times.”

“We’re very fortunate to get a favorable nod and sign off on the water right and funding,” Curran said. “It was a big step for them and in our opinion a courageous step.”

Grand County will hold the water right once it’s adjudicated in state water court.

Russell George, a former state legislator, speaker of the house and executive director of the state Department of Natural Resources, is the Colorado Basin Roundtable representative on the CWCB.

He contended that any perceived change came not so much in the board’s philosophy but in who was asking for CWCB funds.

“The answer is not a simple one,” said George, who currently is president of Northwest Colorado Community College. “What I think has happened is a historical progression.”

George was head of the DNR when the legislation enabling the 11 Basin Roundtables was adopted. He said most of the CWCB funds, prior to the Gore Canyon request, went to “consumptive uses” such as dam and ditch repair and storage projects because those projects sought funding.

“I think there still is an historic image that the CWCB has favored consumptive use, and that (image) changed,” he said. “No one has even asked for that (in-stream funding), so there hadn’t been any funding.”

A news release quoted him as saying it is time “to recognize nonconsumptive rights have a place at the table.” “Just a few years ago this would have been inconceivable, but we’re changing,” he was quoted in the release.

In a recent conversation, he clarified his view, saying, “Really, I think all that has changed is the time.”

Curran said the idea for a whitewater park came up while dealing with Denver Water and the Northern Water Conservation District, both of which are increasing their transbasin diversions of Colorado River water.

The county looked at a recreational and in-channel diversion as a way “to keep some water in the county,” Curran said, “so we filed a water right for it.”

Both Front Range water providers have written letters of support for the whitewater park.

The county last year presented its funding request to the Colorado Basin Roundtable, which unanimously approved \$100,000 to seed the project. The roundtable’s approval and funding paved the way for the CWCB approval, Curran said.

The \$1.7 million whitewater park still is \$500,000 short of being fully funded, Bradford said. She said she hopes to get an outpouring of financial support from boaters using and benefiting from the project.

There also are three objectors remaining to the in-stream water right, Curran said. “We have to settle with them by April 14, or the matter goes to trial in 2014,” Curran said. “We’ll just play the hand we’ve been dealt.”

*Correction: The CWCB vote was not unanimous; the vote was 9 in favor, 1 opposed.