

Colorado Water Plan: Collective action, public trust, and private ownership of water rights

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Abstract. During the 1970s, the State Government of Colorado initiated a water resources planning process through the Colorado Water Conservation Board, but it failed to deliver a plan when controversies created barriers to successful collective action. Some 40 years later the State finally delivered a Colorado Water Plan, which was unveiled to the public in December 2015. Many technological and governance changes occurred during those 40 years and they offer valuable lessons about the process of water resources planning. In addition to hydrologic uncertainties, issues that make planning complex include failures inherent in purely-statist planning systems, the futility of public planning for use of private resources, and the dimensionality of the multi-purpose, multi-stakeholder, and multi-sector elements of water resources management. To probe these issues and how they influenced the Colorado Water Plan the paper will: outline the core purposes of water resources planning and the chronology of its evolution; identify key changes in technology, governance, and public opinion that have shifted the process of water resources management during the last 40 years; and explain how the lessons learned so far in the Colorado Water Plan process apply to emerging global practices of Integrated Water Resources Management.