

# *edible* ASPEN<sup>®</sup>

CELEBRATING THE ABUNDANCE OF LOCAL FOODS IN THE ROARING FORK VALLEY AND NEIGHBORING COMMUNITIES

NO. 23 **SUMMER 2013**







# DRIP IRRIGATION

Western Colorado farmers consider a drier future

By Nelson Harvey

Last summer, just as farmer Scott Horner was preparing to plant some of the carrots, beets, potatoes and other storage crops that would carry his business through the winter months, his irrigation ditch ran dry.

It was July 15, a full six weeks before the water in Paonia's Minnesota Creek is typically diverted downstream to the owners of a more senior water right. But in 2012, due to record drought, there simply wasn't enough water to go around.

Horner runs Small Potatoes Farm, a Paonia-based mixed vegetable grower. Without water, he had no way to start his fall and winter crops, and was forced to abandon many of them for the year.

"That's big for me, because the winter is the first quarter of the fiscal year, so if I'm coming into that without many sales, it really hurts my business for the year," he says. "If I'd had water until even

August 15 last year I could have made a lot more money."

Over in the Colorado River basin, farmer Ken Kuhns of the 100-member Peach Valley Community Supported Agriculture farm was fighting a similar battle against drought.

Kuhns pulls water from a tributary of the Colorado River, and although he never ran out during 2012, he says the drought had a severe effect on his water-dependent crops.

"We plant a lot of spinach, and two years ago we cut about 600 pounds of spinach," he says. "In 2012, we cut a little over 100 pounds, and a lot of that was due to moisture. To go through that for a second year would definitely be tough."

Alas, by early May when this column went to press, state forecasters were calling for another hot, dry summer in 2013.

Spring moisture levels were looking better than last year's, after

late-season storms nudged snow pack up to near-average levels in the Roaring Fork and Colorado River basins.

But reservoirs across the region remain severely depleted after last summer. And new research suggests that water shortages are likely to become increasingly common along the Colorado River, the principal source of water for many farmers on the Western Slope.

By 2060, there could be an annual gap of more than three million acre-feet between water supply and demand in the Colorado River basin, according to a recent study from the Colorado River Water Conservation District.

What's more, most of the proposed solutions for dealing with this water pinch would entail sacrifice from the state's farmers and ranchers.

Agriculture uses roughly 80 percent of Colorado's water. Reducing that share is made difficult by Colorado's "use it or lose it" water law, which strips farmers of water rights they don't use, and conveys them to junior right holders.

There are some innovative tools surfacing to circumvent that legal quirk: A new bill introduced by State Sen. Gail Schwartz (D-Snowmass Village) and recently signed into law allows farmers who enroll in state-sponsored conservation programs to keep the rights to the water they save.

And a group called the Colorado Water Trust recently started leasing unused water from farmers on a short-term basis, and then leaving it in the river to ensure the health of wildlife there.

"Rotational fallowing" is another much studied idea—one already in practice in parts of California. It would create a system where cities could pay groups of farmers to fallow their fields in dry years, and then use the agricultural water for homes, lawns and other city needs.

Such programs could work well for the row-crop farms of Colorado eastern plains, according to Jim Pokrandt, education and communications specialist at the Colorado River District. But on the Western Slope, where vineyards, orchards and other more permanent forms of agriculture predominate, they may be tough to implement.

"Alfalfa is difficult to fallow, as are grapes and orchards," Pokrandt says.

That's because drying out an orchard for a season could kill fruit trees and wipe out a grower's investment.

If Coloradans are going to adapt to a drier future, though, then programs like rotational fallowing will likely play a central role, according

to Nicole Seltzer of the Colorado Foundation for Water Education.

That's particularly true if things get dry enough along the Colorado River to produce shortages in places like Arizona and California. Under a seven-state agreement called the Colorado River Compact, those "lower basin" states are entitled to 8.5 million acre-feet of water per year. If there's less than that in the river, downstream states could call on Colorado to reduce its water use, leaving the state in a tight spot.

"If Colorado was in a situation where they need to deliver more water than exists, then with rotational fallowing they would have a group of farmers on the Western Slope that they could call on," says Seltzer.

For now, Western Slope farmers like Kuhns and Horner are simply doing what they can to cope with drought, and hedging against the possibility of another year like 2012.

"We installed an irrigation holding pond this year," says Kuhns. "We use drip irrigation and plastic mulches to reduce water usage. And we're probably not going to pour a lot of labor into water-hungry crops like corn."

Horner too is choosing more drought-tolerant crops, including potatoes that size up early in the season—when water is plentiful—and then store well.

"Yukon Gold, Purple Viking, Colorado Rose, Red Gold," he says. "I'm focusing more on varieties like that."

There's also a good chance that Horner will have more water at his disposal this year, regardless of what happens with the drought: His ditch maintenance company scored a federal Bureau of Reclamation grant to lay pipe along Minnesota Creek, which will reduce water seepage and is expected to deliver as much as 40 percent more water to ditch users.

"That could be a month more of water, if we're lucky," Horner says, "which would allow me to plant my fall crops in time." <sup>CA</sup>

## UPPER COLORADO BASIN TOUR

Hosted by the Colorado Foundation for Water Education

June 20–21, starting at Keystone Resort in Keystone, Colo.

An on-the-ground look at the most pressing water-related issues in the upper Colorado River basin, including trans-mountain diversion projects piping water to the Front Range.

Visit [CFWE.org](http://CFWE.org) or call 303.377.4433 for details, and to register.



13<sup>th</sup> Annual **MOUNTAIN HARVEST FESTIVAL**

Music • Art  
Crafts • Poetry • Food  
Music & Agricultural  
Workshops  
Farm, Gallery & Winery Tours  
Kids' Activities  
Farmers Market & much more!

**SEPT 26-29**  
**Paonia, CO 2013**

[www.mountainharvestfestival.org](http://www.mountainharvestfestival.org)



Bringing beautiful flowers to your home or event

**MOUNTAIN FLOWERS** 970.920.6912  
*of Aspen* [mountainflowersofaspen.com](http://mountainflowersofaspen.com)