

The value of Wyoming's water Saratoga Sun

By KayCee Alameda

Water is a life-sustaining substance for all plant and animal species on Earth, and here in the Platte Valley, most residents are acutely aware of that fact and take daily steps to conserve this valuable resource. Yet, in many parts of the United States, water is often taken for granted and is used without concern for the loss of this most important natural resource.

Last week's Voices of the Valley discussion brought about ways to conserve water while enhancing fisheries, wildlife and agricultural production.

Scott Yates, director of Wyoming's Western Water Project for Trout Unlimited, explained how ranching operations could contribute to healthy fisheries by re-establishing historical fish migration and spawning/rearing areas. Yates said ranchers could receive financial incentives to leave a small amount of water in-stream. "This project will be totally land owner driven," Yates said, "but there will be limited work done in the Platte Valley because all of the water is appropriated." Yates said the fisheries water project would be gradual from a conservation and pilot-type standpoint.

Joe Glode, local businessman, rancher and President of the Upper North Platte Valley Water Users and the Upper North Platte Valley Water Conservation Associations, told the audience that the general population takes water, and where it comes from, for granted.

Glode said that those who work with water are like a "cult", all understanding of the ramifications of depleting or entirely losing waters sources.

He used the example of Jack Creek, a drainage that has remained completely intact with agricultural contact all of the way down the stream. "When streams remain intact, fisheries, wildlife and ranchlands all benefit greatly," Glode said.

"I wonder if people really realize what we have here and why we talk about beetles, sage grouse, mule deer, fish, water, open spaces...these are indicator species that measure the health and quality of life here in Wyoming."

Glode explained how several states including Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada were in desperate need for water, giving the example of the proposed pipeline from Flaming Gorge Reservoir to the front range of Colorado.

"Water must always go to a higher use, which means humans and livestock, not ranches and fish," Glode added, "that is why our water here is so valuable and must be protected."

Glode said if water is utilized as a political pawn, he is concerned Wyoming won't have the resource we currently enjoy. "If we take water away from agriculture production and put it towards total consumptive use, without any regard to putting the water back in-stream, we will see no fish, less wildlife and less recreation."

Little Snake River Conservation District (LSRCD) Coordinator Larry Hicks echoed Glode's comments by stating that water is a resource of great, but unknown worth. Hicks explained many stream restoration projects taking place in the LSRCD, including diversions for fish passage, fuel breaks for beetle trees near watersheds and drought proofing wetlands, grazing allotments and fisheries.

He went on to say that collaboration and cooperation between agriculture, wildlife, fish and birding groups would be key in protecting Wyoming's water from being piped to another state for consumptive use.