

Mancos pursues title transfer of Jackson Gulch Reservoir

Jackson Gulch process would take 6 to 12 years, superintendent says

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The Mancos Water Conservancy district is continuing its pursuit of sole ownership of the Jackson Gulch Reservoir, MWCD superintendent Gary Kennedy said.

The Conservancy District board passed a resolution about in October 2014 indicating they wanted to pursue a title transfer from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation for the reservoir, which is located north of Mancos on County Road N.

But the process could take anywhere from six to 12 years, Kennedy said. Many municipalities that pursue similar title transfers don't follow-through to the end of that process, he said.

"You have to jump through these hoops," Kennedy said.

The reservoir is 216 acres when full and currently is about 55 percent full, which is above average for this time of year, Kennedy said.

To gain sole control of the lake, the conservancy district needs to buy two plots of land – totaling 280 acres – that are currently in the hands of the Bureau of Reclamation. Kennedy said the board is waiting on appraisals for those two plots, which should come during the summer.

After that, they'll have to contract environmental, archaeological and historical feasibility studies to move forward with the project, Kennedy said.

The biggest stumbling block for the project is the reservoir's dam, Kennedy said. If the MWCD obtains the title for the reservoir, it will assume all liability associated with the dam, he said.

But Kennedy said since the district already operates and maintains the dam, it's already responsible for much of the dam's liabilities.

"If we take over the dam, not much will change," Kennedy said.

If the MWCD obtains the project's title, Kennedy said he hopes it will be easier for the conservancy district to get government grants to fund the project's maintenance and upkeep costs. Since the reservoir currently remains a federal project, it's more difficult to get funding from state and local sources, Kennedy said.

The conservancy district will have many of the same grant opportunities for the project whether the federal government or the MWCD owns the reservoir, Kennedy added. Since the district will be accepting the liability for the project with the title transfer, Kennedy is making the case that the district shouldn't have to pay anything for the project's land.

The only reliable way for the conservancy district to make money is by raising water rates for utility users, he said.

But since the Bureau of Reclamation also is involved with the project, some rate-payers are being double-charged, Kennedy said. Non-project types of water, also called carriage water, flow through the project, and the BOR gets money for those waters, he said. That money goes into the agency's general fund.

If the district can secure the title for the project, that double-charge would go away, Kennedy said. Irrigation water users aren't being double charged, he added.

Operating Mancos State Park with limited federal help also is a costly burden for the MWCD, Kennedy said.

Though it's a slow-moving process, Kennedy remains optimistic that the district can see the project out.

"There are lots of little things that we could work around so the conservancy district gets (the title) free and clear," Kennedy said.