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Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

Colorado National Parks

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Park Service seeks water rights for Black Canyon

Mark Obmascik

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Park Service seeks water rights for Black Canyon

By Mark Obmascik
Denver Post Environment Writer
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For the first time, the National Park Service has outlined a plan to guarantee riverflows through the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument by changing operations at upstream dams.

In an attempt to help wildlife in the spectacular river canyon, park officials formally asked the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation this week to release more water in the spring from the state's largest lake.

Arapahoe County, Montrose projects could be hurt

Blue Mesa Reservoir, and cut back winter releases.

The change could make it tougher for Arapahoe County to build a major new reservoir east of Crested Butte and also hurt the ability of a Montrose group to construct a hydroelectric project, some officials said.

But, the change likely would help white-water rafters and rare fish populations

downtown of the 12-mile-long national monument in southwestern Colorado.

"We believe this will enable us to protect the resources of the monument," said Superintendent John Welch.

Of the more than 340 facilities in the national park system, only two — Death Valley in California and Great Sand Dunes near Alamosa — have legally quantified water rights. The proposed Black Canyon

water contract involves streamflow amounts hundreds of times greater than anything in Death Valley or the Great Sand Dunes

The Black Canyon could become a test case for other expected federal water fights, including an attempt to guarantee regular streamflows in the Colorado River through Grand Canyon National Park.

At issue in the Black Canyon is the basic

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Riverflow proposal raises fear

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nature of a 20,700-acre ecosystem that now survives at the mercy of five upstream dams.

Right now, the Bureau of Reclamation, which owns all five dams, promises to release only enough water to sustain a shallow river with a teeny trout population.

But national park officials now are asking for more water — enough for an annual springtime flood flow that will flush out silt and guarantee scenic waterfalls in the 2,000-foot chasm.

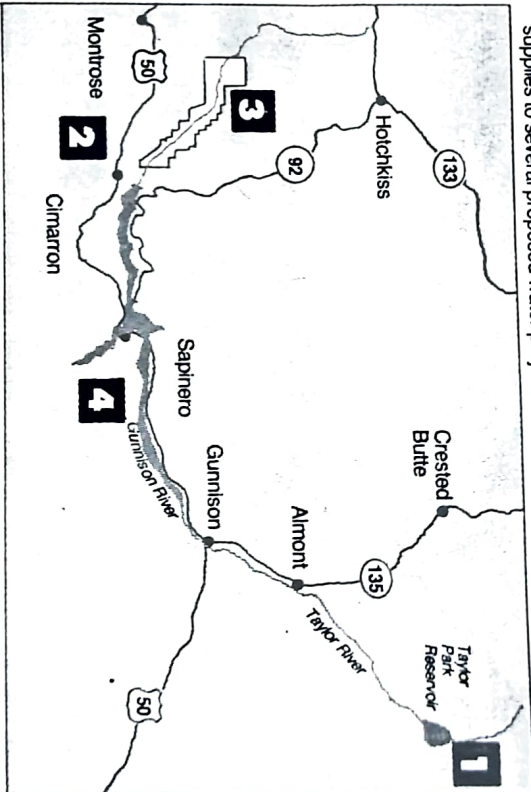
Federal officials refused to reveal the exact amount of water being requested in the proposed contract with the Bureau of Reclamation, noting that the issue is the subject of litigation.

The bureau now has an informal pact to give the Black Canyon 300 cubic feet of water each second. That's about 192 million gallons per day, or enough to support 2,400 new metro-area residents for a year.

However, the Black Canyon is asking for water flows that, in a year with a typical snowpack, would guar-

BLACK CANYON PLAN A PARK SERVICE FIRST

A proposal to designate quantifiable water flows on the Gunnison River through the Black Canyon could ensure recreation opportunities in the area but reduce water supplies to several proposed water projects.



1. ARAPAHOE COUNTY'S PROPOSED UNION PARK PROJECTS
2. PROPOSED A-BLATERAL HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT
3. BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NAT'L MONUMENT
4. BLUE MEAS MORROW POINT AND CRYSTAL RESERVOIRS

The Denver Post / Bruce Gault

antee springtime releases of more than 1,800 cubic feet per second. Each day of those flood flows would be enough water to supply the annual needs of 14,400 new metro-area residents.

Any extra water for the Black Canyon is likely to come from someone else. Because federal officials won't

provide exact flow proposals for the Black Canyon, it's unclear what effect the plan will have on Arapahoe County's proposed Union Park Reservoir, or on the proposed AB Lateral hydroelectric project in Montrose.

National Park Service officials said public hearings likely would be held before any plan is formally approved.

