

**NEWS**

## Aurora water project ahead of schedule, below budget



Dave Marciniak of CH2M Hill checks on the ultraviolet facility that will help purify water in the city of Aurora's Prairie Waters Project, which will provide about 3.3 billion gallons per year.

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AURORA — Prairie Waters, the city's new \$659 million water-purification and -recycling system, will be completed ahead of schedule and almost \$100 million under budget.

Project managers attribute the savings to good planning and trimming nonessential features from the plant.

They also say the bad economy helped ratchet costs down.

Contractors desperate for work submitted low bids for many of the jobs in the construction of the system, Aurora Water spokesman Greg Baker said.

"We took advantage of a strong bidding environment," he said.

The project was estimated to cost about \$850 million, but that was revised to \$754 million before construction started in 2007.

Three years later, with Prairie Waters more than 90 percent complete, the final tab should be closer to \$659 million when the project comes on line by the end of the year, Baker said.

Prairie Waters will draw South Platte River water near Brighton, downstream from the Denver Metro Wastewater Reclamation District's plant. The water will then be sent through sand and charcoal filters and then piped 34 miles to a state-of-the-art treatment facility just north of Aurora Reservoir.

The water will be treated with chemicals and powerful ultraviolet lights to raise it to drinking-water quality, officials say.

Prairie Waters will provide 10,000 acre-feet of water annually, about 3.3 billion gallons of water, which is 20 percent of the water Aurora uses.

An acre-foot of water typically is enough to serve the needs of two families of four for a year.

The city has raised residential water prices, nearly quadrupled tap fees and issued \$450 million in bonds to pay for the project.

Aurora Mayor Ed Tauer said the catalyst for the project was the 2002-03 drought, when the city was down to 26 percent of its water supply.

“This really solidifies our water supply for our residents even in really bad years,” Tauer said. “It means that our ability to use water in our homes is much less dependent on the year- to-year weather.”

Water experts are lauding Aurora’s efforts in creating a renewable water system that recycles water over and over again instead of relying on mountain snow or receding aquifers.

In good-water years, Aurora could lease water to communities such as Douglas County that are searching for new water sources.

“Aurora Water has found something that of course will answer their concerns but also something to help the metropolitan area,” said Rocky Wiley, a former water-management planner for Denver Water who now works for a consulting firm.

“It’s a viable answer, and it’s wet water,” Wiley said.

The Peter D. Binney Water Purification Facility, named for the man who devised and implemented the Prairie Waters Project, is truly high-tech.

It will purify the water with 14 ultraviolet reactors that are about 15 times more powerful than those used at other facilities, officials said.

The reactors were installed because Aurora Water anticipates regulations by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that will require residual pharmaceuticals to be scrubbed from drinking water. The ultraviolet light makes the pharmaceuticals inert or harmless, Baker said.

Trace amounts of pharmaceuticals have been detected in the nation’s water supply, mostly from animal agriculture and humans who flush drugs down their toilets, according to the American Water Works Association.

Up to 50 million gallons of water a day will be treated at the purification facility. During peak-demand periods, water treated at the facility will be mixed with mountain water and piped to homes.

“You’re always planning for the hottest day in July, when people are watering their lawns, taking showers, washing their cars, when every spigot is open,” Baker said. “We had to make sure our water supply would meet that demand.”

Aurora Water officials expect to dedicate the facility in September and will begin testing the system by December.

It is scheduled to be running in full by the late spring or early summer of next year.

“We really have a world-class project here that’s going to make a difference next year and for the next 50 years,” Tauer said.

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