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Sent: Thursday, September 13, 2007 10:22 AM
To: undisclosed-recipients:
Subject: Colorado waters under pressure

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Environment Colorado report shows 21% decline in water quality over eight years

more cops on the beat needed to protect valuable water resources

Colorado's water quality declined 21% for rivers and streams and 31% for lakes over the last eight years, and will continue to decline if changes aren't made, according to *Water Under Pressure*, a new report released today by Environment Colorado Research & Policy Center.

The report cites under-funding and understaffing at the Water Quality Control Division (the "Division") as the biggest challenges to protecting Colorado's water resources.

"We need more cops on the beat; without proper inspection and enforcement of existing water quality protections there is no way to turn this boat around," said Stephanie Thomas, Clean Water Advocate for Environment Colorado and author of the report. "Water is the lifeblood of our state, creating outdoor recreation opportunities, providing drinking water for our cities, and helping Colorado farmers grow our food."

An example of the Water Quality Control Division's need for more staffing is oversight of booming stormwater permits, which are designed to protect waterways from sediment and chemicals running off of construction sites associated with residential and commercial development as well as oil and gas drilling. In 2006, stormwater permits rose 20% over the previous year, to 5,268 active permits.

Yet over the last eight years, the Division has been so hampered by funding limitations that it had only allocated 25% of one employee's time to inspecting these sites and supervising the handful of contractors hired to help. With this level of resources, the Stormwater Unit was able to inspect less than 1% of stormwater permit sites in 2005.

"In fact, an EPA audit of Colorado's program found that it would take the Division 70 years to inspect each storm water permit just once," said Thomas.

The report goes on to illustrate that some of Colorado's biggest challenges to water quality include rapidly expanding energy development such as oil and gas drilling and mining.

"Colorado and other Rocky Mountain states are feeling the impacts of a widespread energy boom," said Max Dodson, who retired in January after 35 years working at the EPA regional office, in charge of overseeing Colorado's water quality efforts. "We're doing a relatively good job given the circumstances, but we still need more presence on the ground to protect our water. This energy boom is going to be around for a long time. Protecting water quality has to be part of Colorado's and the

country's long term energy strategy."

Also, sprawl and irresponsible urban development are playing a large role in affecting Colorado's water quality. For instance, roads and parking lots can deposit up to 2,000 times more sediment and chemical runoff into our waterways than lands that are forested.

"The sprawl and irresponsible urban development resulting from our skyrocketing growth is a huge contributor to decreased water quality," said Thomas. "Over the last eight years Colorado has added 820,000 residents. The effect is like a city the size of San Francisco moving in and paving our wetlands, prairies, and forests into shopping centers, roads, and parking lots.

"The Division needs a big influx of funding and staff in order to keep up," continued Thomas. "In fact, modeling done in 2004 indicates that the Division may need as many as 80 new employees." While the Division has hired 22 new staff members in the past couple of years, it has a long way to go towards 80, and that number may even be increasing with Colorado's growth pressures.

The report also highlights the declining suitability of our rivers and streams for fishing. The percentage of waterways the Division designated as not fishable nearly doubled in just four years, jumping from 8% in 2002 to 15% in 2006.

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"In just four years, we've discovered that the percentage of streams deemed unfishable is twice what we originally thought," said Eddie Kochman, former State Aquatic Manager for the Colorado Division of Wildlife. "Angling, rafting, and kayaking are part of Colorado's \$10 billion outdoor recreation economy. We need to ensure the Division is adequately funded and putting enough eyes in the field to protect our precious water quality. Colorado must ensure protections for aquatic wildlife and outdoor recreation opportunities for future generations."

A big question is where the Division will find the funding for additional employees.

"One option is to charge higher fees on those who most use the Division's services, like permit holders, to fund new employees," said Thomas. "Another may be to further develop contractual relationships with local health department personnel who can then conduct more inspections."