

Horsetooth's waters seem bound for dirty list

Some say fish are in jeopardy because of low dissolved oxygen levels

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Article published February 14, 2006

DENVER — Horsetooth Reservoir likely will make the state's sullied water list after Colorado water-quality commissioners gave preliminary approval to the listing Monday.

The 6-3 vote supported recommendations from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state Water Quality Control Division to put Horsetooth on the so-called 303(d) list.

The agencies said the amount of oxygen in the water failed to meet state standards five of the past 10 years, including 2004 and 2005.

When dissolved oxygen gets too low, fish or other aquatic life can die. A Colorado Division of Wildlife researcher said fish in the reservoir appeared unaffected by oxygen levels. The agency supported the listing to prevent future damage to aquatic life.

The 303(d) list will be finalized in March.

The Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which operates the reservoir, said the data showing low dissolved oxygen was inadequate because it wasn't taken over a 24-hour period. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which owns the reservoir, said low dissolved oxygen levels could be a side effect of the draining and refilling of Horsetooth for dam repairs in recent years.

But the commission sided with state and federal scientists.

"We've got dissolved oxygen as a standard, and we've got information to suggest it's been exceeded," said commissioner Martha Rudolph.

The listing triggers a process with the EPA to identify the cause of the problem and limit pollutants or events that contribute to it, if possible. Low dissolved oxygen in Horsetooth could be caused by natural or human events, including wastewater treatment plants or algae-filled pipelines and canals that bring water to Horsetooth.

The state has up to 13 years to finalize such a plan. Given the contention about the Horsetooth listing and other reservoirs for dissolved oxygen, the state water quality control commission could hear arguments to change the standard or the way it's applied, observers said.

If that happens, Horsetooth could come off the list in two years.