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Horsetooth, Big Thompson on list of impaired water Local waterways draw forum discussion

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GREELEY — Local changes on a state list for impaired waterways drew discussion Thursday at a gathering of water quality experts.

Earlier in the week, the state Water Quality Control Commission listed Horsetooth Reservoir for a decline in dissolved oxygen.

The commission also listed a lower leg of the Big Thompson River that runs from Interstate 25 to the confluence of the South Platte River for ammonia; the river already is listed for elevated selenium levels.

The latest impairments were mentioned in a report by Jeffrey Boring, monitoring program manager for the Big Thompson Watershed Forum.

The forum held its eighth annual meeting in Greeley on Thursday, giving attendees an overview of the group's activities, programs and revised purpose. The nonprofit last year added protection of the river basin to its mission of education and monitoring and assessment.

Boring said in examining data from 19 Big Thompson testing sites that stretch from the Rocky Mountain National Park to the South Platte River, he found that water quality drops with elevation.

While the forum collects information on contamination levels, the state and federal regulatory arms actually list the waterways as impaired.

George Parrish, a scientist with the Environmental Protection Agency, fielded questions about how Horsetooth Reservoir could impact Fort Collins' treated water.

"It's not a public health concern; that water is perfectly safe to drink," he said.

The reduced levels of dissolved oxygen mainly affect aquatic life such as the reservoir's walleye, trout, bass and perch, Parrish said. The impairment could, however, increase the cost of water treatment.

Water in Horsetooth Reservoir comes from the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. District representatives argued against the reservoir listing at a hearing this Monday, said Nicole Seltzer, the water district's public liaison.

Seltzer said district staff members believe it was too soon to list the reservoir as impaired because the state Division of Wildlife cites overall aquatic health.

She added, "At this point we don't really know how we're going to approach this, but we're talking to our stakeholders and our staff."

Parrish stressed that while making the impaired list, which comes out every two years, holds a negative connotation, it really just creates awareness.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," he said. "Getting on the 303D list is only raising the concern level for a particular water body."