

Greeley Tribune

Court justice talks about water justice

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February 17, 2006

When the water flowed through much of the state without problem, most people didn't talk about it.

In those days, before Colorado's most recent drought, Greg Hobbs said water rights didn't interest the average resident.

Hobbs worked as a water rights lawyer for 25 years before he became a Colorado Supreme Court justice. He was the keynote speaker on Thursday at the Big Thompson Watershed Forum. About 85 people filled tables in a conference room at the Aims Community College Corporate Education Center, 5590 11th St. Most of them were water-quality professionals, brought together to discuss the state's water from different perspectives.

Hobbs had a tough act to follow. Channel 7 meteorologist Mike Nelson had just finished teaching the crowd the "Tornado Dance."

Hobbs showed them slides of ancient terraces, built into grassy mountain slopes. He read a poem about the state's rivers, and then he spoke in depth the battle for a limited resource. The clapping was just as loud as for the Tornado Dance.

Afterward, he said he enjoyed talking at events such as Thursday's forum. "There's an opportunity to talk the nuts and bolts."

In a crowd full of water professionals and water interests, you'd expect it to be a hot topic, but Hobbs said the recent drought has brought water issues before everyone: "The tent is a lot bigger now."

Weld County and Greeley in particular have always been leaders in deciding water policy, Hobbs said, and now it's branched to other parts of the state. He said people need to realize the first thing Colorado needs to deal with shortages and competing interests is a plan. Using Colorado's resources efficiently is critical, but so is understanding how to work with senior water rights, he said.

Diana Johnson, associate director of the Big Thompson Watershed Forum, said understanding water issues from all angles is the main purpose of the organization.

"It's so critical that we all work together to understand the different opinions," Johnson said.