

RECREATION

Keystone snowmakers get thirsty

Michelle Nijhuis

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Ski resorts are working overtime to beef up the sparse early season snowfall in the Central Rockies, and the Colorado Water Conservation Board thinks snowmakers at the Keystone Ski Area might be working a little too hard.

In early December, the Summit County resort pulled more than its share of water out of the nearby Snake River, violating the state's right to keep water in the river for the benefit of wildlife. A local water commissioner alerted the state water board to the problem, and Keystone agreed to back off on its snowmaking until river levels increased.

"Keystone has been very willing to work with us," says water board staffer Jeff Baessler. He says a faulty alarm system at the ski resort led to the over-diversion.

The conflict was resolved easily in this case, says Baessler, but the state water board holds about 1,300 instream flow rights throughout Colorado. Since the rights cover nearly 8,000 miles of stream, he says, it's all but impossible for the board's six-person staff to keep a close eye on each one.



“We’re starting to look at where the critical areas are and what we can to do protect those critical areas,” he says.

Melinda Kassen, the director of Trout Unlimited’s Western Water Project, says the Keystone incident illustrates a larger problem with the state’s instream flow program. “This is a demonstration that the system can work, but it can only work if someone is looking,” she says. “This program is a paper program unless you have enforcement.”

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