

Woodmoor Water and Sanitation District:

A Bold Approach to a Renewable Resource

Editor's Note: SDA is proud to feature outstanding special districts who believe in collaboration and efficiency. Woodmoor Water and Sanitation District exemplifies the mission of special districts throughout Colorado while protecting one of our most precious resources...water. This is part one of a two-part feature article. We encourage you to contact SDA if your district would like to be featured in an upcoming issue.



Woodmoor Water and Sanitation District's South Water Treatment Facility includes a xeriscape garden to demonstrate for customers water-saving gardening techniques.

Water comprises most of the human body and is essential to daily life. Throughout recorded history, it has been the cornerstone of civilization—which is probably why the Romans are remembered almost as much for their aqueducts as for their conquests. Today, the availability of clean, reliable, and abundant water remains pivotal to a community's survival and central to its economic development.

That is especially true in the arid Rocky Mountain West, where water's scarcity makes it an almost priceless commodity. To this day, water has make-or-break implications for Colorado's ability to thrive. And securing it for the future—whether in the state's metropolitan areas or its rural climates—can require tremendous foresight, innovative planning and visionary leadership. It's a tall task.

Such was the challenge facing the Woodmoor Community in northern El Paso County a number of years ago when a few dedicated public servants who then oversaw the Woodmoor Water and Sanitation District realized that someday soon they'd be tapped out. The scenic, hilly and naturally wooded locale on the cusp of the Palmer Divide had been growing steadily for years as a highly desirable residential area for commuters to nearby Colorado Springs, retirees from across the country, and refugees from urban congestion everywhere. Yet, as the population was surging, its water system was not keeping pace.

"We were at a crossroads and knew it," said District Manager Jessie Shaffer. "It was clear to us that the mainstay of our water supply was playing out, and Woodmoor's future was on the line."

Since the District's establishment in 1964, it had relied on a network of natural underground aquifers known as the Denver Basin. For a long time, it was a viable source of plentiful and affordable well water. Problem is, aquifers can run out. The many Front Range communities tapping into the Denver Basin were drawing up to 100,000 acre-feet a year, while the basin was being recharged through natural sources at a rate of no more than 12,000 acre-feet annually. Eventually, it would run dry.

A more sustainable approach was needed. While well water drawn from aquifers always would remain part of the portfolio for Woodmoor, the District's leadership understood it had to find renewable sources as well.

"If we were going to build a sustainable system for the future, we would need to be proactive," said Barrie Town, the District board president. "We would need to aggressively pursue wide-ranging options."

Guided by a strategic water plan, the District undertook several fundamental steps in the ensuing years to secure renewable water sources, including:

- It acquired Lake Woodmoor in 2001 in order to provide storage for exchange credits from Monument

Creek and supplement the groundwater supplies from wells.

- In 2009, it filed a plan in Water Court to facilitate moving water from the Arkansas River and identifying storage sites. The District also entered into several purchase contracts for renewable water rights.
- In 2011, it decided to purchase the JV Ranch and its surface water rights, with an estimated average annual consumptive use yield of 3,500-acre feet, together with a reservoir in southern El Paso County. The District financed the effort with a \$28 million bond issue.

Alongside these bold strides in acquiring renewable water sources, the District also has been addressing the conservation side of the equation and employing measures that now are standard for water districts everywhere. There are rebates to District consumers for purchasing water-saving appliances; designated watering times for property owners; market-based pricing, like increasing-block rates for property owners and tap fees on new development, and educational efforts—even a xeriscape demonstration garden maintained by the District.

Underlying the entire agenda has been assertive leadership that took the initiative in forging a plan in the first place and reaching out to the public to enlist its support.

"You need to have an objective, and you need to educate people as to exactly what is going on in the District," said former District Manager Phil Steininger, who helped make the case and lay the groundwork for the District's shift in water policy.

"The epic effort also required a shift in philosophy," Steininger said. "Today's water users must understand the need to invest in the users of tomorrow," he maintains. "It's not just the people in the future who should be paying for that water, but it is the people who are using it now as well."

Thanks to the vision of the Woodmoor Water and Sanitation District, water users have made a down payment on a vital public service—and a renewable resource—that will benefit their community for generations to come. 🌱