Keystone: H2O Outdoors grows, attracts diverse crowd

Keystone Science School program attendance nearly doubles since last spring
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Last year, attendance was around 16, mostly hailing from the Front Range. This year's attendance is nearly double that, with students from many pockets of the state, including Delta, Silt, Glenwood Springs, New Castle, Steamboat Springs, Summit County, Denver and Highlands Ranch, said Dave Miller, Keystone Science School's school programs director and coordinator of the weekend event held roughly twice each year.

“We ... have been working with teachers from around the state to help recruit,” Miller said. Between website marketing and increased communication with schools, word has spread. Most students found out about the program directly from their classroom teachers, Miller said.

The goal of H2O Outdoors is to provide students with an understanding of the different perspectives within water management, Miller said. Students learn about water-management issues by going into the field and doing hands-on classroom activities. They are tasked with taking on the role of a stakeholder in water management and playing that role when they come together to discuss solutions for sharing water in Colorado and beyond. It's a method the Keystone Science School's parent organization — The Keystone Center — uses with adult experts addressing science and public policy issues.

Learning by being
On Saturday, the first day of the fall program, each of the 28 students read their stakeholder role, which varied from a manager of a western slope municipality to representing Denver Water to learning how Keystone Resort's Brett Lockard might approach water use in Colorado to protect his interests in creating a quality golf course and snowmaking prior to the ski season — both of which drive the economy.

Students then sat in front of panelists, ranging from Lockard to Summit County Commissioner Karn Stiegelmeier to Taylor Hawes of The Nature Conservancy to Denver Water's Trina McGuire-Collier and Greg Baker of Aurora Water.

Each stakeholder presented his or her take on using and protecting Colorado's waters, and issues they face in their jobs. Afterwards, students met with panelists in small groups to pose questions and better understand the roles they'd be taking on in today's town hall meeting.

The goal is to allow “students to create deeper understanding of their stakeholder role before they experienced directly some of the issues the stakeholders are discussing,” Miller said. On Sunday, among other activities, students toured Dillon Reservoir via pontoon boat and received lessons on where Front Range water comes from, how and a sampling of the politics involved.

“I have a question about the (Prairie Waters Project),” one student said on Saturday evening, referring to Baker's description of Aurora Water's latest major water recovery project, which takes its portion of discarded water flowing through the South Platte, treats it and pipes it back upstream for reuse. “Doesn't it take water from people downstream?”
The answer was complicated, involving water law and water rights, agreements made with Western Slope municipalities and more — and it was answered by multiple stakeholders.

Another student asked about the 1922 Colorado River Compact, including why Mexico was left out of water allocations and what will happen if it's reworked to include them.

Students dug deep into their stakeholder roles, often moving on with their expert panelist into issues beyond those they were tasked with understanding.

At Hawes' table, she and students discussed everything from the amount of water it takes to put a steak on the table to using water to produce solar energy (they need to be cleaned) to water getting shipped out of state in the form of Coca-Cola or Coors beer.

“How do we move water around and save as much as we can?” Hawes challenged her students.

An impactful program
Over the years, the program that originated with Keystone Science School and the Colorado River District has gained support from Denver Water and Aurora Water.

Matt Bond, who handles community relations for Denver Water, said he was excited about how many towns and cities were represented through student attendance.

“The ability to bring the holistic approach to as broad an audience as you can is important because these types of programs are rare,” he said.

For Greg Baker, Aurora Water's manager of public relations, the program is important for youth to explore a complex issue in depth. It was his first exposure to it, and said he envisions Aurora Water becoming more involved.

“I’m impressed with the depth (of the program). Most are simplistic,” he said. “This is trying to teach the complexity of water in Colorado... on a holistic basis, because it is holistic.”

Miller said he, the partners and his staff are continuing to evolve the program's curriculum, and sees it eventually expanding impact by becoming available to teachers across Colorado to teach in individual classrooms.