Water Law Basics
or
“Whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting over”

Joseph B. Dischinger
Colorado’s
Prior Appropriation System

- Riparian system
- Prior Appropriation system
Colo. Const., Article XVI, § 5:

“The water of every natural stream, not heretofore appropriated, within the state of Colorado, is hereby declared to be the property of the public, and the same is dedicated to the use of the people of the state, subject to appropriation as hereinafter provided.”
What is a water right?

- Right to use beneficially
- A specified amount of water
- From the available supply
- In priority
How a water right is acquired

• Appropriation
  – Intent
  – Diversion or control
  – Application to beneficial use
How a priority is established

• Adjudication
  – Postponement doctrine

• Decree awarded to structure, not to person

• Plans for augmentation
River

Ditch A

Farm A

- Appropriated: 1868
- Adjudicated: 1912

Ditch B

Farm B

- Appropriated: 1902
- Adjudicated: 1903
Absolute water rights

- Water has been applied to beneficial use prior to the time of adjudication
- Right is “perfected”
- Over time, measure of water right is based on the actual beneficial use made of the water right
Conditional water rights

- Intent and “first step” toward appropriation, but water has *not* been applied to beneficial use
- Necessity for reasonable diligence
- Priority date relates back
How a water right is lost

- Abandonment
- Forfeiture (failure to perfect)
How a water right is changed

- Change in point of diversion
- Change in type of use
- Change in place of use
- Non-injury: necessity to determine historic consumptive use
How a water right is conveyed

• Real property
  – Ditch company stock
• Severance
• Necessity for change of water rights?
Questions?

Joe Dischinger
Fairfield and Woods, P.C.
1700 Lincoln Street, Suite 2400
Denver, CO 80203
303-894-4404
jdischinger@fwlaw.com