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Special to the Sentinel

It was a wet spring here in the Grand Valley, for many the wettest they can remember. For some of us, this means we can procrastinate no longer on re-shingling the roof. For others, it raises important questions about rainwater and how it's used. Surely letting all that water run down the drain is a waste of our most precious resource, some people say. Is it really a problem saving a few gallons now so we can water the veggie patch in August when it's really dry? Isn't that a wise use of water?

Opinions are divided on the wisdom of rainwater capture. While it seems to be common sense that a raindrop which falls on your roof is yours to use, in fact, without a legal water right, rainwater capture (for the most part) is still illegal in Colorado. Since it's a practice that is often not policed, many residents are under the false impression that it's not a problem, yet it's a particularly sensitive issue among many who manage water resources. The most common objectors are agricultural irrigators and well owners, which has to do with Colorado's 130-year old water-rights system and local hydrology. For the agricultural community, irrigation water is the basis of its livelihood. If agricultural water rights are not respected, then the sustainability of local farming and ranching enterprises may be at risk. For well owners, if water that would otherwise percolate into shallow aquifers is diverted by rainwater harvesting, this jeopardizes water delivery to homes and businesses that lack access to a district or municipal water distribution system.

These restrictions on rainwater capture have not prevented Colorado legislators from identifying ways to let it happen in certain situations. Governor Ritter recently signed Senate Bill 80 into law, which allows rural residents who depend on well water for household use to substitute harvested rainwater for pumped well water. The same permitting rules apply to rainwater capture as to an exempt well, as long as capture is from the roof of the primary residence.

The notion that all water that hits your roof is eventually put to use by a water-rights owner somewhere downstream was recently challenged by an investigation into rainwater return flows. The study, called the Holistic Approach to Sustainable Water Management in Northwest Douglas County, sponsored by Douglas County and other water users found that water running off roofs and paved surfaces does not always rejoin surface water pathways, such as rivers and streams.

This study led to state legislators passing House Bill 1129, which Governor Ritter signed into law. The bill allows 10 new residential or mixed land-use developments to pilot capture of rainwater from roofs and impermeable surfaces for non-potable uses.

Interested parties will need an augmentation plan for captured water and should contact the Colorado Water Conservation Board for proposal guidelines.

We live in a semiarid climate where droughts will always be a part of our environment. Water for our future means conserving now. The Drought Response Information Project (DRIP) is a collaboration between the valley's domestic water utilities and CSU Cooperative Extension to provide information and educate the public about drought and the importance of water conservation.