

[Leader in state water plan moving on to practice law](#)



James Eklund

By Dennis Webb
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A Mesa County native who led the effort to develop Colorado's first water plan is leaving his job with the state to join a legal firm.

James Eklund, director of the Colorado Water Conservation Board, is stepping down this month to begin work as an attorney with the international law firm Squire Patton Boggs, which has a Denver office.

Eklund has worked for the state for more than a decade. He initially did water work in the Attorney General's Office before becoming senior deputy legal counsel to Gov. John Hickenlooper in 2011. He became director of the CWCB in 2013, putting him in charge of the state's water policy and planning efforts. There, he led the agency's creation of a state water plan aimed at identifying ways to address the gap between the state's water supply and anticipated future demand.

"Definitely that's kind of the signature piece that I was able to work on," Eklund said Monday. "The stars aligned. It was a perfect environment for that to really be successful."

He said the effort to get the plan adopted was driven by Hickenlooper's "willingness to spend political capital on water where it hadn't been spent before," the grassroots roundtable groups in each of the state's major river basins that helped develop the plan, and the drought that has beset the region for some 15 years.

An important thing for Eklund was how the plan and a separate cooperative agreement reached between Denver Water and Western Slope entities addressed concerns over future development of Western Slope water by the Front Range.

“Just as a Western Slope person it really made me proud to see that kind of leadership from the Western Slope,” he said.

Eklund continues to have family ties in the Plateau Valley, where his great-great-grandparents homesteaded in 1888.

He said he didn’t know whether his new work would involve Front Range water projects.

“I hope to use my knowledge and skill set to move water infrastructure projects forward statewide. We are one connected state,” Eklund said, pointing to the improved relationships he believes have been achieved between the Front Range and Western Slope when it comes to water issues.

Eklund said he will remain the state’s representative for negotiations on interstate and international Colorado River issues as long as Hickenlooper wants him to remain in that capacity.

Russ George, who is finishing up a stint as chairman of the Colorado Water Conservation Board, said Eklund did a good job as director.

“The gem in his crown I would think is the state water plan. He really stepped up on that one and worked hard and guided his staff” on the labor-intensive effort, George said.

Jim Pokrandt, spokesman for the Colorado River District and chair of the roundtable for the Colorado River Basin, said Eklund was fair-minded and understood the viewpoints from both sides of the Continental Divide.

“I thought the water plan was a victory and a lot of credit goes to his staff as well as to him,” Pokrandt said.

He also credited Eklund and his staff for coming up with a temporary funding plan for making up for a drop in oil and gas severance tax revenues used to help fund water projects across the state. Legislation on that plan is being considered by state lawmakers.

George said he believes replacing Eklund will involve a process started by state Department of Natural Resources executive director Bob Randall, interviews with finalists by the board, and a final hiring decision by Hickenlooper.

Eklund’s departure comes as the state also will be losing Dick Wolfe to retirement this summer as state engineer and director of the Colorado Division of Water Resources. That division is responsible for things including water distribution and administration, dam safety, and permitting of ground water use.