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1986 deal complicates Glade issue

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An agreement about the Poudre River made 22 years ago is causing ripples in the current controversy over Glade Reservoir.

At issue is whether hard-fought negotiations that resulted in 75 miles of the river in Poudre Canyon receiving federal "wild and scenic" designation in 1986 included an agreement that water projects proposed below the designated area would be accepted by environmental groups.

Former U.S. Sen. Hank Brown, who as a congressman sponsored the legislation establishing the Poudre as wild and scenic, appeared to insinuate as much during recent public discussions about the draft Environmental Impact Statement for Glade Reservoir and the proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project.

Local environmentalists who were involved in the bruising battle over the designation have bristled at the comment, saying Brown isn't remembering correctly how the discussions went.

The designation applies to the river upstream of Poudre Park. The legislation, which was signed by President Ronald Reagan, specifies that the designation cannot be used to preclude development of water rights along the river below the hamlet.

But nothing in the law or the negotiations leading up to its passage stated a dam would be built, said Gary Kimsey, founder of the environmental group Friends of the Poudre.

"What we agreed to was that in exchange for having a large segment of the river protected, the lower eight miles would be left open," Kimsey said. "Even then the talk was about a dam. But no one said anything that was proposed wouldn't be subjected to analysis."

In a telephone interview, Brown said there was no written agreement among environmental groups and water providers that a reservoir would be built. But there was "a spirit of cooperation" in the back-and-forth discussions and an understanding that water rights held by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District would be developed in the future.

"If we didn't have compromise between the environmental groups and the water providers, the legislation would have never passed," he said. "Either side had the ability to kill it."

Northern Water let go of two prime dam sites because of the wild-and-scenic designation, much to the dismay of some water providers, said Brian Werner, spokesman for the agency.

After the designation was established, Northern Water proposed building Grey Mountain Reservoir on the main stem of the Poudre near its confluence with the North Fork to exercise its water rights on the river.

Stiff local opposition and a re-evaluation of the project led Northern Water to pursue Glade Reservoir, which would be built north of Ted's Place and inundate land already owned by the district.

Water would be drawn from the river using an existing diversion and placed in a forebay below the

Glade dam. The water would then be pumped over a hogback to be stored in the reservoir.

“This project has evolved into something that makes a lot more environmental sense,” Werner said. “I don’t think people understand how far this project has come.”

Brown acknowledged that the wild-and-scenic designation has not been used by opponents of NISP and Glade Reservoir as an argument against the project.

But he added opponents of the project appear to believe not building the project will curtail growth in the region. The growth will still come, he said, but the water to meet its needs would come from irrigated farmland.

Opponents of the project, including the Save the Poudre Coalition, say growth will come but not at the rate water providers are projecting.

They argue the region’s water needs can be met without building more large reservoirs through alternative approaches, such as increasing conservation measures. They also argue farmland may be protected through agreements that allow blocs of farmers to fallow their fields on a rotation basis and lease their water to municipalities.

A poll by Denver pollster Ciruli Associates paid for by Northern Water and released Friday showed majority support for the project in Fort Collins and Larimer and Weld counties.

Kimsey said what happened more than 20 years ago is tied to the current debate about NISP, but for the most part it is not relevant. Some of the players are the same, but the discussions “are about different issues,” he said.

What matters most are Glade’s potential environmental impacts on the river, he said.

“I personally believe dams are evil,” he said. “Building Glade would be less evil than destroying the lower part of the canyon with a dam, but that doesn’t mean I support it.”
