

A DRAINING PROCESS

print

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With a dam proposal nearly ready for public scrutiny, the Poudre earns "endangered river" status.



Mark Easter of the Save the Poudre coalition.

Weighing in at about seven hundred pages, with a four-year gestation period, the preliminary environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Northern Integrated Supply Project is a large and highly anticipated baby.

Otherwise known as NISP, though better known as Glade Reservoir, the project is the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District's intended solution to meeting the water needs of fifteen northern Front Range entities. Northern Water officials had hoped to have the statement vetted and approved over a year ago. Carl Brouwer, Northern Water's project manager for NISP, recently summed up the months of pushed-back release dates and preemptive arguments during the district's recent water-users meeting, saying, "We are weary."

And that was before the water district knew anything about the project's potential impacts unintentionally landing the Cache la Poudre River on the list of America's Most

Endangered Rivers.

NISP would collect water by siphoning the Poudre's peak flows during wet years into Glade, an "off-channel" reservoir, meaning it won't dam the river. Glade would be a little larger than Horsetooth Reservoir and force the relocation of Highway 287 at the mouth of Poudre Canyon. A second reservoir, Galeton, would capture flows from the South Platte River as part of a water exchange between Eastern Plains' farmers and project participants, mostly aspiring bedroom communities and water districts undergoing rural-to-suburban transformations. The entire project would develop enough water for about eighty thousand new households and cost over \$420 million.

An impact statement presents the purpose and need for any major project that involves the federal government, then provides a range of alternatives and an analysis of environmental impacts. The overseeing government agency, in this case the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, frequently tags a preferred alternative in an impact statement, identifying the management option that can most effectively meet the stated objectives. For NISP, the purpose is to fulfill the water demands of its participants, a major advantage for Northern Water. A 2006 Army Corps analysis has already labeled the constructions of Glade and Galeton as the preferred scheme.

If birthing the document has felt draining — for Northern Water, its consultants and the Army Corps, all having played a part in producing the impact statement, with support from additional agencies — its public life will not be any less exhausting. A seemingly well-organized band of supporters, known as the Save the Poudre coalition, is ready to administer a thorough poking and prodding to the impact statement, which should be available by early May.

"We're going to put the entire document under the microscope and dissect the thing," says Mark Easter, a member of the Sierra Club Poudre Canyon Group and a spokesman for Save the Poudre.

As the statement has undergone its prolonged preparation, Save the Poudre members have raised the national profile of Colorado's only nationally designated Wild and Scenic River and drummed up concern over the consequences of Glade Reservoir. Ads with the Poudre's dry riverbed have shown up in national magazines. The *Los Angeles Times* recently covered the future of the Poudre. New Belgium Brewing has featured the river — and the naked butts of ten local activists — in its own nationwide promotions. The message is that NISP will destroy a much beloved river already compromised by upstream diversions. (Read "[Ship of Fools](#)," from the December 14, 2006 edition).

Ellen Wohl, a Colorado State University geosciences professor, says one of the key aspects for maintaining river health is the annual peak flow, because the higher flows create habitat, move sediment and flush contaminants.

"And NISP is just going to chop off any peak flows," Wohl says. "NISP severely compromises our ability to restore the river," which already runs dry for periods because of the existing diversions.

"I really just couldn't stand to see the river die like that," Easter adds. "This river is incredibly important to me and my family and just about everyone I know. That's why I'm working to protect it, and I hope others will do the same."

The science and sentiment against dewatering the Poudre has led to the dubious culmination of the river being recognized this

week as one of the "most endangered" streams in the U.S. by American Rivers, a national conservation group. Environmentalists are using the notoriety to showcase that the off-channel dam and water-development project would threaten river health. They're also casting doubts on a few key issues that could sway public opinion and official decisions about NISP.

First, Brouwer and other Northern Water officials say the project would stall pressures on farms and their water rights from municipalities. Developing water from the Poudre would avoid drying between forty thousand and sixty thousand acres of irrigated farmland, Brouwer says. An Army Corps document calculates that 69,200 irrigated acres would be lost if NISP isn't built. But environmentalists claim that logic is circular, since the project would accelerate the development of existing farms into subdivisions in the participating communities. By Easter's own calculations, at least twenty thousand acres of green farm fields could be paved by NISP-fed growth.

The project could cost Northern Coloradans the other green, too, Easter says. In the last year, new housing starts in the region have dropped precipitously; a similar real-estate burp in the future could bear some severe debts for NISP participants responsible for the estimated \$426 million project tab.

Participating communities and water districts would have to issue bonds to pay for their shares of Poudre water and then reimburse the money through tap fees from new homes. If growth rates stumble in towns like Frederick, Erie and Windsor, citizens would likely be saddled with increased water rates or new taxes, and the governments might struggle to pay back the money.

"This is a debt disaster in the making," Easter says.

The public has ninety days to comment on the impact statement and its analyses. The district has already tentatively slated two public hearings for mid-June, one in Fort Collins, one in Greeley. The Army Corps will then consider the comments and complete a final impact statement and record of decision. Raising new rounds of questions on the project's environmental, economic and agricultural impacts is a formula for stretching out scrutiny of NISP and the final impact statement even longer. So is a lawsuit, should it come to that.

"I will say, folks on the other side have been very successful," Brouwer said at the Northern Water spring meeting.

But if the district feels threatened by its opponents' success or worn down by the process of the impact statement, Brouwer and other officials are still talking with a decidedly "not *if*, but *when*" kind of attitude. If everything goes according to Northern Water's plan, the district could have government approval and be moving forward on designs by the end of the year.

"The Northern district has been talking about this project like it's a done deal for years," Easter says. "It's anything but."

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