

Climate change, fracking, water shortages in Northern Colorado top environmental concerns in coming decades

Written by Bobby Magill

Jul. 28

coloradoan.com

As the environmental challenges Northern Colorado faces in the coming years continue to mount, a look back at headlines of a half-decade ago shows how quickly the region's environmental concerns have evolved.

Uranium mining, vehicle emissions testing, the bark beetle infestation, rules governing national forest roadless areas and the proposed Glade Reservoir all were among the top environmental issues of the day during the summers of 2008 and 2009.

Back then, controversy over the proposed Glade Reservoir was beginning to boil over, Larimer County residents were learning that emissions tests soon would be required for their vehicles and a company called Powertech was doubling the size of the area it wanted to use for a uranium mine east of Wellington.

The term "fracking" didn't appear in the Coloradoan until the end of 2009. Oil and gas development in Northern Colorado wasn't the subject of a news story until early 2010, when the Coloradoan reported that energy companies were likely to rush to Weld County after a well gushing "sweet crude" was drilled near Grover.

Today, Powertech's uranium mining plans are on indefinite hold. Glade Reservoir is still in the environmental review process. Bark beetles have left millions of dead trees in their wake. Wildfires have ravaged the foothills. Emissions testing is a fact of life. The roadless issue is settled.

Fracking has become one of the region's most controversial environmental and economic issues. And more attention than ever has turned to severe drought, extreme weather and climate change.

A water shortage in the Colorado River basin is becoming an urgent concern. Catastrophic wildfire is an annual reminder of ongoing drought. Farmers are following their land because of uncertain water availability. The rapid expansion of the oil and gas industry throughout the region has had residents from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs worried about what that means for their air, water and quality of life.

In short, the region's environmental challenges have changed quickly and dramatically in the past five years. The Coloradoan asked five experts, activists or policymakers what they think the most pressing of these issues are in the coming years and what can be done about them.

Scott Denning, Colorado State University atmospheric science professor

Water shortages partly due to climate change, the tension between agriculture and development, and stressed, declining forests are among the biggest environmental challenges Northern Colorado faces today, Denning said.

Too little precipitation is feeding the region's water supply, which is divvied up among too many people and industries, he said.

A warming climate evaporates more water, leaving less and less for human consumption and to sustain the health of the region's forests, he said.

"Climate change is dramatically changing our forests," he said. "What we have seen is the trees are dying out at the bottom of their range, and there aren't lots and lots of seedlings replacing them. We may see deforestation of the foothills in our lifetime."

Water shortages mean that it's not inevitable that farmers will win in a water battle between agriculture and urban consumption.

"A modern economy that's thoughtful about it can probably make do with a lot less water than we use," Denning said. "There has to be some kind of conversation about the allocation of that resource and how much of it is going to support irrigated agriculture."

Jenn Vervier, sustainability director at New Belgium Brewing

Vervier said the region's most critical environmental issues are the health of the Poudre River watershed; the proximity of oil and gas development to homes, schools and the region's water supply; over-allocation of the water in the Colorado River; climate change and exurban sprawl.

"We may never solve these problems entirely, but I believe we can achieve incremental improvements, which will preserve and enhance Northern Coloradans' quality of life," Vervier said.

She said residents can help by supporting Fort Collins' efforts to restore the Poudre River as it flows through the city and advocate for water rights that allow for continuous water flow in the river, or in-stream flows.

"Advocate for smarter oil and gas regulation," she said. "Learn about the issues facing the Colorado River and support federal legislative efforts to improve them. For example, ask President Obama to enact the proposed Clean Water Act headwaters guidance to secure protection for small streams and wetlands."

And, she said, residents here should help make Northern Colorado a leader in smart grid technology and renewable energy.

"While we may not be able to stem the tide of global climate change, we are fast becoming a world leader in innovation, resiliency and clean energy-based economic development."

Fort Collins Mayor Karen Weitkunat

Water scarcity is the most pressing environmental issue facing Northern Colorado today, Weitkunat said.

"All other environmental problems have a direct connection to our water resource whether it is quality or quantity," she said. "It has the most attainable solutions and greatest possibility for universal average citizen involvement since it impacts everyone and everyone shares in the desire for a positive outcome."

State Rep. Randy Fischer, D-Fort Collins

Fischer said the list of concerning environmental challenges the region faces is long: Population growth,

water quantity and quality, healthy rivers, fossil fuel development, deteriorating forest health, wildfire, climate change and air pollution.

“Readily available, evidence-based solutions exist for all of these concerns except for, perhaps, population growth, which is a driver for most of the environmental issues we face in Northern Colorado,” Fischer said. “Population projections by the state demographer predict that Colorado’s population could double by the year 2050.

“If so, maintaining good air and water quality; meeting our energy, water and transportation needs; protecting our healthy rivers; keeping a viable agricultural economy; protecting our abundant open spaces; and preserving the high quality of life we enjoy today will become much more challenging,” he said.

Gary Wockner, executive director of Save the Poudre and Colorado director for Clean Water Action

Wockner ranks population growth, climate change, fracking, destruction of rivers and unsupportive political leadership as the biggest environmental issues Northern Colorado currently faces.

“We have the opportunity to make a difference at the local level in Fort Collins by addressing the threat of fracking at the ballot box,” he said. “We have a real opportunity to protect and restore the Poudre River. Stopping NISP (the Northern Integrated Supply Project) and continuing to move forward with river protection and restoration are very attainable. I predict NISP will never be built.”

He said the public has an opportunity to push politicians toward supporting increased regulations for drilling and fracking and to unseat policymakers who refuse to support new restrictions.

“Extreme energy extraction, including fracking, is very likely going to be in issue that grassroots democracy and ballot initiatives address in the next six to 24 months,” allowing voters to have their voices heard over the din of corporate polluters, Wockner said.

Follow Bobby Magill on Twitter at [Twitter.com/bobbymagill](https://twitter.com/bobbymagill).

Follow Bobby Magill on Twitter at [Twitter.com/bobbymagill](https://twitter.com/bobbymagill).