

North Forty News

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Coalition seeks new Glade EIS

By JoAn Bjarko
North Forty News

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A coalition of 14 groups opposed to building a new Glade Reservoir near the mouth of the Poudre Canyon has decided to offer alternatives along with its criticism.

Calling its plan the Healthy River Alternative, the Save the Poudre Coalition is among the many who turned in official comments to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers by the mid-September deadline. The Corps is the permitting agency for the proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project, of which Glade Reservoir is one of the alternatives.

In addition to debunking population growth estimates and calling for more water conservation, the coalition proposes an alternative water sharing arrangement with agriculture called rotational fallowing agreements.

The coalition describes rotational fallowing as "contracts between municipal and agricultural water users whereby municipalities pay irrigators to regularly fallow some of their fields in return for contract payments equal to or exceeding the value the water would yield if used to irrigate crops." The concept has been successfully applied in California and other parts of the West, according to Save the Poudre.

The draft environmental impact statement for NISP looked at rotational fallowing from the perspective of cities buying agricultural water rights and converting them to municipal use through the state water court. The draft EIS said NISP

would have to purchase at least 103,000 acre-feet of agricultural water to generate 12,000 acre-feet of firm yield each year.

Save the Poudre, however, is suggesting fallowing agreements that keep the water rights under agricultural ownership with leases to municipalities.

"A recent survey of South Platte basin irrigators found that 63 percent of interviewed farmers would be willing to participate in a rotational land fallowing program, if compensated adequately," Save the Poudre said in its comments to the Corps.

A spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, Brian Werner, responded that the concept was already studied and rejected. Werner said Northern Water looked at fallowing in the mid-1990s, but very few utilities want to base future water supply on a lease arrangement.

"We found that what cities are willing to pay is less than what farmers wanted," he added. "It's unrealistic."

On the topic of costs, the coalition contends that the draft EIS cost estimate for NISP--\$426 million--is severely understated because it does not include loan finance costs nor the costs of impact mitigations being sought through the environmental review process.

After reviewing comments from the cities of Fort Collins and Greeley, which are concerned that Glade's water diversions could increase their water treatments costs, Save the Poudre is contending NISP costs could hit \$1.2 billion to provide 40,000 acre-feet of water.

The coalition also contends that the draft EIS does not meet the basic requirements of the federal National Environmental Policy Act or the Federal Clean Water Act, so it is calling on the Corps to start over with a new analysis of alternatives.

Methods of analysis used for the draft EIS "guaranteed that a combination of small, flexible, less expensive, and incremental water supply projects would never be seriously considered," Save the Poudre wrote. "Being blind to small-scale, appropriate development is a recipe for unsustainable water projects and, as our analysis shows, failed to identify a suitable alternative that would preserve what is left of the Cache la Poudre River."

Save the Poudre is further advocating that the region should look for ways to restore the river rather than diverting more water. The concept includes new programs that would give tax credits for water donations or loans used to restore river flow and new policies that would raise the legal standing of water quality issues

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Web site by S. Virginia De Herdt, Freelance Writer

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