

Cooperation needed for restoration

Neil Grigg

When media coverage focuses on "saving the Poudre" and an "endangered river" designation, it shows only one side and distorts the picture. The Coloradoan's April 20 story of the proposed Glade Reservoir near Fort Collins provided a more balanced picture of our choices about this project.

It is no coincidence that American Rivers has designated the Poudre as third on its endangered list at just the time when a decision is near on the environmental impact statement. The river in first position on their list (the Catawba-Wateree River of North and South Carolina) also faces decisions, both about an interstate dispute and for a new hydropower license. I recently facilitated an interstate forum and also participated in a local forum about the proposed Glade Reservoir. Neither river seems at a crisis point, but both need balanced management attention.

When American Rivers designates a river as "endangered," it gets attention. It is harder for the water managers who are looking for balanced solutions across the country to get equal attention. They take a lot of flak while trying to meet public needs for water services and provide environmental water. Their story needs to be told, as well.

Use of language such as "save the Poudre" or "endangered river" stirs people's emotions, but it hides the tough questions that must be answered to find balanced uses among complex issues. At best, the polarized news coverage will simply entertain us. At its worst, it can block our search for balanced solutions that work for everyone.

We need more informed dialogue about how to manage these rivers. Emotional slogans send the message that David can slay the Goliath trying to "kill" these rivers and all will be OK. But it won't be OK, because hard work is required to identify and implement balanced water management strategies. If reasoned approaches to river management are blocked, the results are apt to be worse in the future, not better.

On the Poudre, the proposed reservoir would skim off flood flows, store them and make them available for use within the Northern Integrated Supply Project. It won't affect the wild upper reaches of the river. You also won't see different flows through Fort Collins most of the time, but you would see reduced flows through the city during the annual flood periods. This is the main environmental change that will result from the project.

Flood flows on the Poudre do benefit the ecology of the riparian area from the canyon mouth near Highway 287 to the river's mouth in Greeley. That's the part of the Poudre River we're talking about. That part of the river needs a lot of restoration anyway, and stopping Glade Reservoir would do little to help.

What the Lower Poudre needs is not to be "saved" but to be "restored" and made healthier. This is going to take cooperative work, not polarization. The public debate ought to be about how we can make the river better, not how to kill a project.

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