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Corps' Peter key to Glade decision

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The future of the Poudre River could run through Chandler Peter.

Through his job with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Peter will make a recommendation on whether the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District can build the controversial Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP, and tap into the river's water to meet the needs of growing Northern Colorado communities.

NISP includes building Glade Reservoir north of Ted's Place that would draw on the river and Galeton Reservoir near Greeley that would tap into the South Platte River.

It's an important decision, Peter said, and one he and other Corps administrators are far from making. When the decision comes it is not likely to end the controversy, he said.

"I figure the Corps is going to get sued one way or the other on this proposal based on what I'm hearing," he said.

Opponents might sue if a permit to build Glade is issued and the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which is proposing the project, might sue if it is not, he said.

In either case, it would be a new experience for Peter, who in 17 years with the Corps has not had a project taken to court.

A long process

Peter is overseeing the Corps' lengthy process of developing an Environmental Impact Statement, or EIS, for the project. The document is required by the National Environmental Policy Act because of the scope of the project. The commander of the Corps' Omaha District will decide whether to issue a permit for the project as prescribed in the Clean Water Act.

Peter's job is to keep track of thousands of pages of information to determine the potential environmental impacts of the project and whether those impacts can be mitigated. Contractors help with much of the analysis.

At the same time, he's also working on EIS documents for other Front Range water projects, including the expansions of Halligan and Seaman reservoirs proposed by the cities of Fort Collins and Greeley.

Trained as a biologist, Peter has worked in Wyoming, Texas and New Jersey. He consults with Corps offices around the country on projects involving an EIS process.

Peter is a stickler for process and details, said Carl Brouwer, project manager for NISP with Northern Water.

He's unfailingly honest and expects the same from others, Brouwer said.

"I don't always agree with him, but I always know where he's coming from," Brouwer said. "If you're trying to pull a fast one, you're not going to do it."

Opponents of the project have had extensive contact with Peter and the Corps over the last three years, said Gary Wockner, spokesman for the Save the Poudre Coalition.

Wockner said individuals involved in the federal agency's decision-making process are not an issue for Glade foes.

"For us this isn't about the law and how it's being carried out," he said.

Impartial observer

The Corps is neither a proponent nor opponent of NISP, he said. Its job is to be unbiased and make sure federal law is followed in crafting plans for the project. If a permit is issued, the agency also will make sure any restrictions imposed by the permit are followed.

Comment on the draft version of the document is being taken through July 30, although the comment period may be extended. Peter plans to make a recommendation on whether to extend to comment period within the next few weeks.

He's likely to recommend an extension to the commander of the Corps' Omaha District. At issue will be how long to make the extension.

So far about 200 written comments have been submitted and hundreds of people have attended public hearings on the project. Another hearing is scheduled tonight in Greeley.

The comments have shown areas that need more research, he said, including water quality issues raised by Fort Collins officials and the accuracy of projected impacts of the project on the river's ecology.

With no stake in the outcome of the project, Peter said he and the Corps "have nothing to hide." Peter said he welcomes the input; it helps him see what he might have missed.

"It's one thing to be for or against a project, but I always like to ask that question, 'why,' " he said. "But I also expect other people to ask me 'why' and I'd better have a reason for what I'm doing."
