

Crowd skeptical of Million water project

BY [REBECCA BOYLE](#).

Water-right holders, conservationists and academics expressed skepticism Monday night about a Herculean plan to take water from a faraway Colorado River headwaters and pump it through Wyoming to Colorado's Front Range.

But the project's leader said it could be an environmentally sound way to bring excess water to growing Colorado cities and towns.

The proposed Regional Watershed Supply Project, the brainchild of a CSU-trained environmental economist, dwarfs even the Colorado-Big Thompson project. It involves at least three new reservoirs, 578 miles of pipe from southern Wyoming to Pueblo and 16 pump stations to bring a river's worth of water to the thirsty Front Range.

It would pump 250,000 acre-feet of water from the Green River, near Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area in Wyoming, through southern Wyoming and into Northern Colorado. Ultimately, the project would impact the North and South Platte river basins and even the Arkansas River basin thanks to exchanges and new reservoir construction.

Aaron Million, a Fort Collins resident, proposed the project three years ago. The Army Corps of Engineers agreed to review it after he applied for a permit.

A meeting Monday at Fossil Ridge High School was one early step in what promises to be at least a five-year review process.

Many residents who offered opinions said they were concerned the Green River is already too dewatered.

Duane Keown, a retired professor at the University of Wyoming, has fished the Green River for 30 years, and in the past five years, he's seen one of his state's largest campgrounds stay empty because of drought.

"The Green River, truthfully, folks, does not have any extra water," he said. "If you look at the prognostications over the next 35 years, there are more droughts on the way."

Others said they wanted the Army Corps to examine other water storage proposals, including the proposed Glade Reservoir project, or even pipelines that would bring water from the frequently flooded Midwest back toward the Rockies. Still others said they wouldn't support a project that would allow for more growth in arid Colorado.

Longmont resident Ken Bauer quoted projections that the region will be short of water by about 450,000 acre-feet in the future, and environmental changes will mean huge reservoirs like Lake Mead and Lake Powell will be even lower than they are now. Taking more money out of one of the Colorado River's headwaters could exacerbate the problem, he said.

"You're looking at the wrong problem. I think it's actually going to contribute to the problem on both sides of the Divide," he said. "If people want to grow, maybe they should grow where the water is. It's that direction (east) and it's not that direction (west), and it's not here."

Million said his graduate thesis work at Colorado State University four years ago showed there's a surplus of water in the Colorado River system, and his project is the fruit of efforts to get at it.

"We've been looking at ways to bring an environmentally sound, new water resource into the state," he said.

He said a new water source would diversify the Front Range's water portfolio, and would help prevent drying up of agricultural land, not to mention draining local rivers to meet municipal water needs.

He even sported a savethepoudre.org sticker, hoping to convince Glade opponents that drawing water from the Western Slope would negate the need to drain the Poudre River.

"This may be the key to alleviating some of the issues that they see," he said.

But Gary Wockner, a spokesman for the Save the Poudre Coalition, hinted that Poudre people in Fort Collins would stand with their compatriots in Wyoming.

"I'm very happy that you support the Save the Poudre Coalition, and thank you for wearing the sticker tonight," he said, "but the idea that we would take water out of the Green River and potentially put in the Poudre is sort of a rob Peter to pay Paul scenario, and I don't think that makes a lot of environmental sense."

Effects on the river were not the only environmental concern.

The largest proposed reservoir, Cactus Hill, would be located just south of a proposed in-situ uranium mining site. In that project, Powertech Uranium Corp. aims to pump oxygenated groundwater through uranium-bearing sandstone to remove the radioactive metal. Some residents were worried about a new reservoir being located so close to the proposed mine.

The project is a long way from beginning, let alone being built. A draft environmental impact statement, required under the National Environmental Policy Act, wouldn't be ready until 2012, and a decision about whether to build the project would come two years after that.

Proponents of the Northern Integrated Supply Project hope to be under way by then, however.

In that vein, Wockner asked the Corps to consider adding the Million project to its list of potential alternatives to NISP and other water storage projects like the Windy Gap Firming Project; proposed expansions to Halligan and Seaman reservoirs; and others.

Million said that would be up to the Corps, but he hoped the Glade opponents would support his project as a more environmentally friendly alternative.

"What we have found, to date, is that we have a surplus water supply that can be used to mitigate other impacts on the region," he said. "We think this is by far the least environmentally damaging alternative out there."

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