
Divisions over Glade Reservoir deepen between city and Northern Water district



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Comments from supporters and opponents of Glade Reservoir flowed in increasingly contentious torrents in the days before the project's formal review period drew to a close last week.

For one, the water authority that hopes to build the new reservoir north of Fort Collins shot back Tuesday against the City Council's vote to criticize the project.

Brian Werner, spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, or Northern Water, said the district wanted people to know the project would not cost Fort Collins millions of dollars.

"We're hearing from too many people that they've bought into that, that it's going to cost the citizens of Fort Collins hundreds of millions of dollars," he said. "It's not going to cost hundreds of millions. That's probably our bottom line."

Should Glade Reservoir require Fort Collins water treatment facilities to be upgraded, the people paying for Glade would pay for that, too, Werner said.

The issue is about the Northern Integrated Supply Project, also known as the Glade Reservoir project, which would take water out of the Cache la Poudre River in its high-flow season and put it into a new reservoir.

Glade, which would be located along the Great Hogback north of Ted's Place and which would require the relocation of several miles of U.S. 287, would provide new water storage for anticipated growth on the northern Front Range.

Advocates say the goal is to prevent farms in Weld County from drying up, their water demanded by thirsty growing communities.

But opponents, who include conservation groups and environmental advocates, say the harm to the Poudre's ecosystems and Fort Collins' economy would be too great.

Gary Wockner, a spokesman for the Save the Poudre Coalition, a collection of activist organizations, said the group wanted a new study by the Army Corps of Engineers, the agency tasked with examining the project's environmental impacts.

He said the Save the Poudre group had a different idea to provide Front Range communities with more water, by using conservation programs, exchanges with farmers and even rotational fallowing of farmland.

A team of researchers and attorneys who reviewed the EIS gathered Wednesday night to request an entirely new environmental assessment with those ideas included.

"We are very optimistic that the Army Corps will have to go back to square one and analyze alternatives that are less environmentally damaging and cheaper, which is what our alternative is," Wockner said.

The environmental assessment took four years and \$6 million.

The city of Fort Collins asked for a supplemental study, not a brand-new one.

In a 15-page report prepared for City Council last week, Fort Collins city staff estimated that Glade-spurred upgrades to wastewater and drinking water treatment facilities could cost between \$75 million and \$125 million.

Fort Collins discharges its treated sewer water into the river, so if there was less water in the river to combine with it, that could force changes to the system. What's more, the city's water treatment plant could require upgrades if water from Glade, which would contain a frothy mix of spring snowmelt full of organic matter, is mixed with water in Horsetooth, which is somewhat clearer.

Werner disputed the city's claims about those changes but added that if they proved necessary, the 15 communities that want to build Glade would have to pay for them.

"If there are costs associated with it, for, let's say, advanced treatment systems, that's a project cost. That will be part of permit conditions," he said. "We want the people of Fort Collins to understand they're not going to have to pay for that."

But the Army Corps of Engineers' draft environmental impact statement doesn't say that directly, which city officials cited as a chief concern.

John Stokes, director of Fort Collins' Natural Resources Department, said estimates of water infrastructure improvements and associated costs should be addressed in a separate environmental impact statement.

"In any permitting process, we would be seeking binding commitments from the Army Corps of Engineers and the proponents to indemnify the city against any fiscal damage, or, for that matter, other kinds of damages, to quality of life issues, wildlife and vegetation," he said. "Right now there is nothing in the written record, in their permit application, that would lead us to believe that we would be indemnified from financial harm."

The city has 14 "themes" it will include in its formal comments to the Army Corps, which will be submitted by the end of the week, Stokes said. They include effects on water infrastructure but also on the local economy and on the environment in the river corridor.

The Larimer County Commissioners also weighed in on the environmental impact statement, saying Tuesday it lacked sufficiently deep review of several issues, including moving U.S. 287.

Commissioners also said the proposal doesn't comport with land-use guidelines that call for preserving open spaces.

"Glade Reservoir is not consistent with these specific plan elements in that it will permanently impact these important natural resource areas and redefine their place in the county's landscape," the commissioners wrote.

Wockner said the Poudre coalition's suggestions would provide 35,000 acre-feet of new water without harming the environment.

Glade would provide 40,000 firm, or guaranteed, acre-feet of water a year. An acre-foot is enough water for about two homes for a year.

Wockner said it's fairly common for conservation groups to suggest alternatives that would have a smaller environmental footprint.

"One of the best ways to defeat a project is to come up with an alternative that better meets the needs that the EIS has set out to do, and we believe we have done that," he said.

He added that the mission is still to stop the project.

"Our goal is to save the Poudre River and get more water back in it rather than drain it, and we're looking at all the options on the table to do that," he said.

Those options would ostensibly include a lawsuit.

While anticipating a fight, Northern Water officials want to keep lines of communication open.

Werner said correspondence from the city has been null since the environmental study was released April 30, but the district hopes to work with the city to address its concerns.

In fact, they'll have to do so before the project can move forward. The Army Corps must react to every substantive question raised during the past few months, according to federal law.

Stokes said that's exactly the point.

"Part of reason for the process is to reveal issues and disagreements just like this," he said. "This is how this process is actually supposed to work. You are supposed to put out a proposal, and people have a chance to critique it, and based on that critique, we continue to have a process or a dialogue to resolve some of these issues."

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