

A New Urgency: Drought reignites zeal for impounding Poudre River water for suburbia

First, let's get this out of the way: Nobody is proposing to dam the Poudre River or turn Poudre Canyon into a chain of lakes. At least, not anymore.

But the 2012 drought has brought an often breathless sense of urgency to the debate over the need for the big alternative to damming up Poudre Canyon - a massive dam building project called NISP that would siphon water from the Poudre River and turn a valley on U.S. Highway 287 north of Fort Collins into Glade Reservoir - a lake bigger than Horsetooth Reservoir.

The drought proves that Northern Colorado still needs to find "buckets" in which to store water during wet years so the region can have a water savings account for years like this one, said Brian Werner, spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, NISP's mastermind and chief advocate.

Northern Water's bucket of choice is Glade Reservoir.

Larimer County is holding its breath in wait of word on the fate and impact of NISP, the Northern Integrated Supply Project, which

has seemingly been sitting in a state of bureaucratic stasis in the offices of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials, who for the last four years have been reviewing NISP's possible environmental costs.

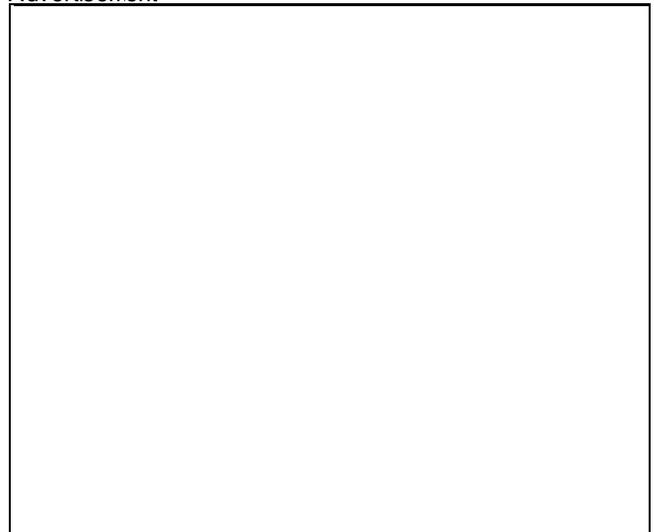
The current plan to build Glade first went public in 2004, and it calls for water from the new lake to be sent to farmers, towns and suburbia north of Denver.

"The current drought throughout Northern Colorado has brought home a stark reality — we need more water storage and soon! Without it, our children's and grandchildren's future will be at risk," Weld County Commissioner Sean Conway wrote in the Windsor Beacon on July 17.

He warned that a Colorado without NISP would be a Colorado with 100 fewer square miles of irrigated farmland in Weld and Larimer counties. It would be an economic and environmental disaster, he said.

Conway exceed Northern Water's annual

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NISP rally last month in Fort Lupton, where State Sen. Mary Hodge of Brighton, one of the project's most ardent proponents in the Colorado Legislature, was the lone Democrat preaching to a choir of NISP true believers.

"I've always thought it would be smart to store water when we have excess," she said last week. "When we hit a year like we've just gone through, I think it points out how smart it would have been to store water from the year before."

NISP detractors point to water conservation as one of the biggest components of a panacea for the state's water shortages, but Hodge, who rated highly in Colorado Conservation Voters' 2012 legislative scorecard for her pro-environment voting record this year, said conservation can't override the need for NISP.

"You can conserve only so much," Hodge said. "When you conserve as much as humanly possible you don't leave yourself room for a year (like) you have now."

The bottom line, she said, is that the Front Range isn't going to stop growing, and all those new Windsorites, Erieans, and Frederickers must have access to more water.

Perhaps to illustrate the political peril surrounding NISP, Gov. John Hickenlooper's administration has no official position on the project except to say that it encourages water projects to have "multiple benefits." NISP has those benefits, and the state

hopes that the Army Corps has prioritized its review of the project, Hickenlooper wrote in a May letter to the Army Corps.

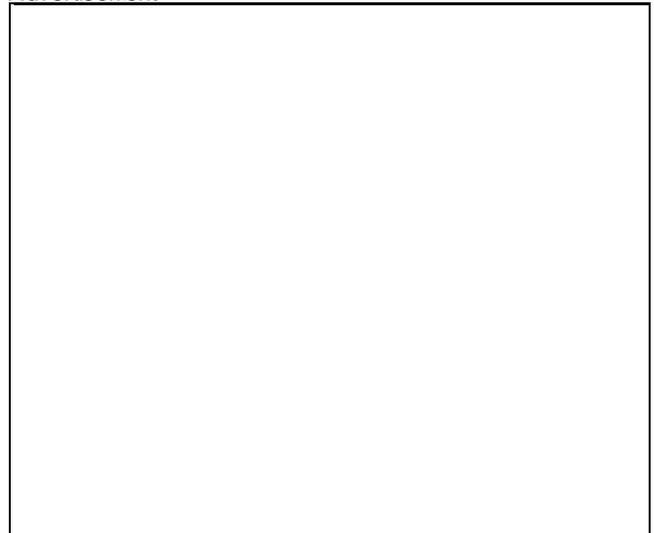
"The governor has not endorsed NISP," Hickenlooper's special water policy advisor John Stulp said Thursday, adding, "There's no question about when we have a drought that we start looking at what our options might be to help minimize the impacts of future drought."

Minimizing those drought impacts involves tradeoffs, Hodge said.

For Fort Collins, those tradeoffs would have a direct effect on one of the city's most prominent features.

If it's built, NISP could sully the normally-raging Poudre River as it roils, swollen with snowmelt, through Fort Collins during most Mays and Junes. The river, conservationists say, could be sentenced to a permanent fate of looking like it did this June, when the drought-stricken Poudre slowed to a nearly-silent stream almost wholly

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deprived of its typical spring runoff.

As the river's spring flows would be heavily reduced, more than 2,700 acres of native plant communities would be lost, the Army Corps concluded in its draft environmental review.

The city of Fort Collins worries water quality in Horsetooth Reservoir could be degraded by a pipeline sending Glade water into Horsetooth Reservoir, possibly costing the city millions in capital costs to ensure the quality of its drinking water is maintained depending on how much water is transferred between reservoirs.

And, in addition to harm city natural areas along the Poudre could suffer if the river is diminished, the city could have to spend in excess of \$125 million to upgrade its water treatment facilities to protect the river.

Warring over Damming the Poudre

Gary Kimsey's grandparents settled in Poudre Park in the 1920s, and he would visit their canyon home along the river frequently when he was growing up in Kansas City.

Since moving to Northern Colorado in 1976, Kimsey, who now works for Poudre Valley Hospital, has worked long enough to save the Poudre from impoundment to know that when droughts come along, so, too, comes discussion of dam building somewhere in the Poudre watershed.

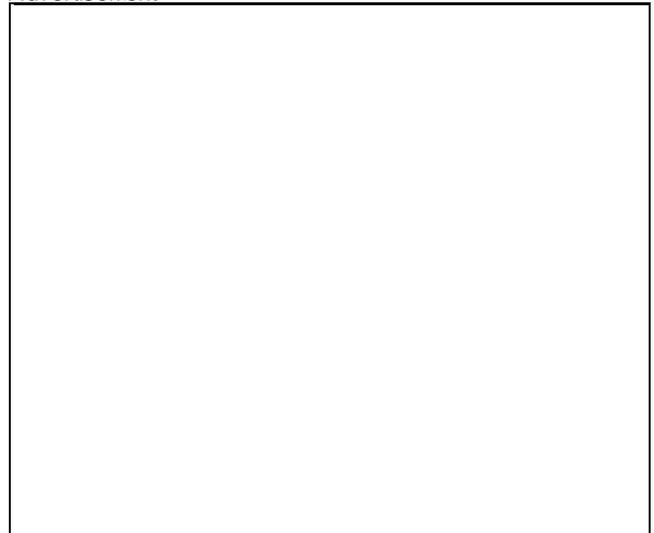
But the era of big dam proposals on the Poudre River evaporated decades ago after Congress protected a long stretch of the river as wild and scenic in 1986, effectively canceling the Cache la Poudre Project, a proposal to build a chain of reservoirs throughout Poudre Canyon. A later plan to build a dam lower in the canyon was also scuttled.

The Colorado Legislature passed a bill in 1981 mandating that the state study the feasibility of the Cache la Poudre Project. A group called Preserve Our Poudre was formed to oppose the project, and it successfully convinced Congress to bar development along most of the river in the canyon with Colorado's only federal Wild and Scenic River designation.

"That left the lower eight miles open to a dam," Kimsey said.

So, Kimsey helped found Friends of the Poudre, which still exists today and successfully fought the proposed Grey Mountain Reservoir, which would have

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inundated the lower eight miles of the canyon where Gateway Natural Area currently sits.

Kimsey is adamant that Glade Reservoir is no viable alternative to either of the previous efforts to dam the Poudre, primarily because he's convinced there never will be enough water in a changing climate to fill Glade, and the economic and ecological problems a water-starved river could cause for Fort Collins are too complex.

But even Poudre River advocates are divided on NISP and Glade.

"NISP is the natural outgrowth (of the fact that) we didn't build a dam on the main stem at Grey Mountain," said Bill Sears, president of Friends of the Poudre, who said the primary concern in the 1980s was to ensure that the values of a free-flowing river in Poudre Canyon trumped the value in storing water there.

But now that the canyon is protected, "the need for water storage doesn't go away," he said. "So, where are you going to put it?"

"To their credit, Northern has scoured the area thoroughly," he said. "I think they make their case for Glade, but until the Corps of Engineers makes their final ruling, I'm hesitant to make a hard and fast stand."

But NISP's primary opponent, Save the Poudre: Poudre Waterkeeper, makes no apologies for taking a stand against dialing

down the flow of the Poudre River through the city.

"We're in one of the worst droughts - one-year droughts - that we've seen in 50 years," said Save the Poudre Executive Director Gary Wockner. "If NISP is built, every year will be a drought year for the Poudre River."

In other words, the drought is turning the water-starved Poudre River into the kind of river Wockner fears it will be through Fort Collins if Glade Reservoir deprives it of its peak flows.

"Rather than drain and destroy our rivers, we need to seek alternative paths forward that rely on conservation, reuse and recycling, and cooperative agreements with farmers," he said.

Cities need to encourage their residents to stop watering their grass, and NISP proponents are using fear tactics when they suggest such intense uses of water won't go a long way to reducing the region's

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thirst for more water, he said.

But while droughts can teach people how to use less water, cities and Colorado's water managers are making it difficult for the public to make the connection between drought and conservation, Wockner said.

"I'm not sure people really notice the drought until they're told to restrict water," he said. "And, in most of Northern Colorado, there are no watering restrictions right now. If we have a two-year drought, that could change dramatically."

But there's another side effect to drought despite any conservation measures that might be taken, Werner, of Northern Water, said.

"Dacono and Frederick and Firestone and Fort Lupton -- they're not going to just quit growing," Werner said. "They're going to go out and buy it (water) from farmers. Without NISP, they're estimating we have another 100 square miles of Northern Colorado (farm land) dried up that otherwise wouldn't have been. It certainly slows it down if we have alternatives to the growing city."

The clock on the long permitting process for NISP continues to tick as next year's snowpack and the region's future water resources become less and less certain as the climate changes.

"I gotta see this through," Werner said.

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NISP in a Nutshell

What is NISP?
The \$500 million Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP, would siphon excess water from the Poudre River and store it in the proposed Glade Reservoir north of Fort Collins. The project would supply water to cities and farmers in Larimer, Weld, Morgan and Boulder counties, similar water diversion would be built on the South Platte River in Weld County, and the 40,000-acre-long Gileeten Reservoir would be built northeast of Greeley.

What is Glade Reservoir?
Glade Reservoir is a proposed 170,000-acre-foot lake 1 would be built in a valley on top of U.S. Highway 287 north of Ted's Place. Before a dam is built near Ted's Place, a highway would be re-routed to the east around a hotstick ridge. The water would be diverted from the river via an existing canal near the mouth of Poudre Canyon and also in the proposed Glade Reservoir north of Fort Collins. It would be larger than Horseshoe Reservoir, which holds about 155,000 acre feet of water.

How would Glade Reservoir be filled?
Water would be siphoned from the Poudre River via an existing canal near the mouth of Poudre Canyon during times of high flows, especially during high spring runoff and thundersqualls.

Who gets the water and who pays for it?
15 municipalities and water districts are involved, including the Central Weld County, Left Hand and Fort Collins-Loveland water districts and the towns of Windsor, Severance, Lafayette, Peesook, Erie, Evans and Dacor among others. Those entities plan to pay for NISP with cash, bonds and low-interest loans.

Where will the Poudre River be dammed?
It won't. No dams are proposed to be built on the river.

Why is NISP controversial?
NISP would reduce the flow of the Poudre River through Fort Collins because water to fill the reservoir would be siphoned from the river upstream of the city. Conservationists fear the reduced flows would starve the river corridor of water, wildlife habitat and vitality that Fort Collins. Save the Poudre director Gary Wockner is that Glade would turn the river into a vein-round low-flow stream similar to what the river looked like this summer during the height of the drought.

Who else is involved?
NISP was re-examined by the Bethesda-based Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is conducting the environmental review of the project.

What's the current status of NISP?
The Army Corps' initial environmental review came out in 2008, but it decided to take another look at NISP's environmental impact after receiving hundreds of comments and objections from area residents and the cities of Fort Collins and Greeley. A supplemental draft environmental impact statement, originally expected to be released in 2011, is in the works now, and it's expected to be made public near the end of 2013. The Army Corps' final decision on NISP is expected in 2014.

What's holding up the environmental review?
The hydrology of the Poudre River Basin. In addition to NISP, the cities of Fort Collins and Greeley are planning expansions of the existing Haffner and Seaman reservoirs on the North Fork of the Poudre River. The Army Corps is studying the environmental challenges with the projects as well.

The hydrology of the Poudre River Basin is very complex and the Army Corps is taking its time to ensure that the hydrology is being accurately analyzed in the same way as all three reservoir projects, said Chandler Filer, Northern Environmental Policy Act coordinator for the Army Corps.

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NISP's Long Road

Early 1990s:

> Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District looks for alternatives to earlier proposals to build a reservoir within Poudre Canyon to address the need for additional water storage.

2001:

> Northern Water completes feasibility study of Glade Reservoir.

2004:

> Northern Integrated Supply Project permitting process begins. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hold first public meetings about Glade Reservoir, which would be built directly on top of U.S. Highway 287 north of Ted's Place.

2005:

> Public gets first view of U.S. 287 realignment proposal before the Army Corps permitting process moves ahead late in the year.

2006-2007:

> Army Corps develops its environmental review for NISP as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

2008:

> Army Corps releases its Draft of the NISP environmental impact statement, or EIS.

> Environmentalists and the cities of Greeley and Fort Collins excoriate the project during the public comment process, saying the Army Corps failed to adequately analyze the environmental and economic impacts of NISP. The U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency questions whether NISP will violate the Clean Air Act.

2009:

> Army Corps announces plans to revise the draft EIS to account for the public's negative feedback about the project. Called the NISP "Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement," the updated environmental review's release date is set for June 2010.

> Late in the year, the Army Corps delays the release of the update citing the need for complex hydrological modeling of the Poudre River Basin that would account for how the proposed expansions of the Halligan and Seaman reservoirs would affect NISP.

2012:

> The revision's release date is set back to late 2013. Four years have passed since the Army Corp released its draft environmental review for NISP.

2013:

> After the revised environmental review is released, the public will be invited to comment again.

2014:

> The Army Corp's expected final decision on NISP to come sometime during the year.

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