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EIS due soon: Water project

By JOHN BRENNAN

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Times Editor

An official of a water project in which Fort Morgan plans to invest more than \$36 million over the next 12 years urged city officials Thursday to actively support the project as the approval process moves forward.

The Northern Integrated Supply Project, known as NISP, is proposed by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. It involves the construction of a five-mile-long reservoir northwest of Fort Collins and a smaller reservoir northeast of Greeley to supply water to the 15 participating entities.

The reservoirs would be filled by diverting water from the Cache la Poudre and South Platte rivers.

The participants — which include Fort Morgan and the Morgan County Quality Water District as well as other municipalities and water districts like Fort Collins-Loveland, Erie, Fort Lupton and Lafayette — have committed to invest in the project in return for a percentage of the water yield based on their level of investment.

Carl Brouwer, manager of the project management department for the NCWCD, briefed members of the Fort Morgan Water Advisory Board as well as several city council members and other officials Thursday on the status of the project.

The final environmental impact statement for NISP is due to be released to the public on April 30, Brouwer said. While the district's original plan was to have the EIS done by the end of 2006, just getting it completed is significant, he said.

"Getting to that point is a huge deal," he said. "A lot of projects peter out before reaching this point."

NCWCD has been working on NISP for four years, Brouwer said, which is a relatively short time compared to many projects of similar scope.

After the EIS is released, a 90-day public comment period will ensue, he said, and those who are involved with the project will need to participate and express their support.

The final EIS will "generate the most press coverage we've seen so far, until the project is actually built," he said.

The EIS, which is coordinated by the Army Corps of Engineers, looked at some 200 alternatives and

examined all of the environmental impacts of the project, Brouwer said.

“The science says it’s going to be OK,” he said.

The proposed reservoir was found to be the “least damaging practicable alternative,” Brouwer said.

An EIS also looks at the alternative of “no action,” or not going forward with a proposed project. Brouwer said no action in this case would lead to the drying up of some 40,000 to 60,000 acres of agricultural land.

“The costs and impacts of no action would be double the cost of NISP,” he said.

Brouwer said NISP is opposed by a “very small but very vocal” group of people who claim it will dry up the Poudre River. He said that is not true, and it will be important for participants in the project to educate the public about what the project actually involves.

“Instead of being reactive … you need to get the message out,” he said. “And the message is ‘we need this, and here’s why.’”

In addition to making comments during the 90-day EIS period, Brouwer suggested talking to local legislators as well as the public about the importance of the project, and possibly holding public informational sessions.

As to the price tag of \$36 million, Brouwer said officials should acknowledge that the cost is high.

“You don’t have that kind of expense often,” he said. “For Fort Morgan it really comes down to, do you want to go back to wells?”

City Councilman James Powers said he had put together a tour of the reservoir sites in the past and that it may be time to do so again. When people see the actual land where the project is proposed, they will understand it better and be less likely to think it will be damaging, he said.

Members of the city water advisory board seemed unanimous in their support for NISP.

“I don’t think anybody can question how important this is to Fort Morgan,” said board Chairman Jack Odor.

Two public hearings, one in Fort Collins and one in Greeley, will be scheduled sometime in the middle of the 90-day comment period — probably in mid-June, Brouwer said.

After the comment period, if any specific deficiencies are identified in the EIS the Army Corps may decide more work is needed.

Brouwer said the biggest potential setback would be if the EIS “missed a huge alternative,” but he said that’s unlikely because the process examined 200 different potential actions.

Once the final EIS is approved, NCWCD would work with the Army Corps on project permits. The goal is to start work on the large reservoir in 2011 and have it online by 2015, he said.

With a 9 percent stake in NISP, Fort Morgan is the third-largest investor, behind Erie and the Lefthand

Water District that serves a large area around Boulder. The Morgan County Quality Water District is involved for a 3.25 percent share.

— Contact John Brennan at editor@fmtimes.com.



Water pro John Brennan/Fort Morgan Times Carl Brouwer, manager of the project management department for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, speaks to members of the Fort Morgan Water Advisory Board on Thursday about the status of the NISP water project.