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Fort Morgan should change course

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and Mark Easter

Fort Morgan should be very concerned about being involved in NISP — the Northern Integrated Supply Project — that will include the massive Glade Reservoir northwest of Fort Collins and include a huge debt for the citizens of Fort Morgan. The project is skating on financially thin ice, and it would devastate the Cache la Poudre River in Larimer County and beyond.

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project is already over two years late and has cost double what it was supposed to. The whole project itself was supposed to cost \$360 million, and now the cost overruns have pushed the price tag to \$425 million. The total cost to pay back the bonds after interest will be over \$800 million.

The total cost just for the City of Fort Morgan would be \$40.5 million in capital costs, and \$83.6 million including interest over 30 years. The debt load per current Fort Morgan family is about \$14,000, and about \$29,000 including interest. These numbers are very scary since Fort Morgan is such a small town.

Several other cities have already dropped out of this risky project because of the cost overruns. Moreover, when Berthoud recently dropped out, it had a hard time finding a buyer for its shares and had to sell them at a considerable loss. Cities and water districts are increasingly wary of this megadam project, and they should be.

In the southwest part of Colorado, the Animas La-Plata dam is almost completed, but only after being held up for years in court by environmental groups, and after skyrocketing cost overruns over a 20-year construction period. The Animas-LaPlata project was originally supposed to cost \$338 million, and now its total cost is over 50 percent higher at \$515 million and climbing. This project was paid for mostly by federal dollars, but NISP will be paid for by small cash-strapped cities like Fort Morgan.

If the NISP project goes forward, Fort Morgan, like the other participants, would issue bonds to pay off the cost of the reservoir, and those bonds would be paid back by new tap fees on new homes. The new growth would have to come fast, too, just to pay the bonds back. If the growth does not come fast enough — or even if it does — citizens of Fort Morgan would likely have to pay this project back by hikes in water rates or other fees.

The Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District has already warned Larimer County that the coming recession may delay the project. But, once construction begins, Fort Morgan and all the

participating cities are locked into a bond payment, growth or no growth. This is a one-size-fits-all project that locks every city into the same rapid growth rate and the same long-term mega-debt load with the same consequences.

What the City Council of Fort Morgan, and most Fort Morgan citizens, don't know is that NISP would also devastate the Cache la Poudre River and take even more water out of the South Platte as it runs through Fort Morgan. The Poudre River is already in serious trouble and is dry frequently during the year. And now NISP is proposing to take 35 percent of what little water remains out of the river. A large coalition of environmental groups including the Audubon Society, Sierra Club and the Colorado Environmental Coalition has vowed to fight this project due to its devastating impact on the Poudre River. The City of Fort Collins is also very concerned.

If built, NISP would:

1. Permanently threaten the downtown Fort Collins economy, and this will occur at the same time that the City has identified the river as one of its "economic engines."
2. Devalue the millions of dollars that have been spent on the natural areas and bike paths that run along the river through Fort Collins. This money has come from Fort Collins, Larimer County and Great Outdoors Colorado.
3. Severely degrade the recreational and aesthetic experiences the river offers including rafting, canoeing, tubing, birding and fishing.
4. Severely degrade the ecological health of the river, and the health of the associated natural areas, wetlands, fishery, bird habitat and riparian forests.

If Fort Morgan is smart, it will look elsewhere for water that is less expensive, does not tie its citizens into long-term debt and rapid growth, and does not cause devastating environmental impacts to one of our regional rivers.

We urge Fort Morgan to change course now.

— Gary Wockner, PhD, is a spokesman for the Save The Poudre Coalition (SaveThePoudre.org). Mark Easter represents the Sierra Club Poudre Canyon Group.