

# Gardner: Environmental assessment of Glade reservoir has gone on too long

BY JEFF THOMAS ON FEBRUARY 22, 2013 IN DISPATCHES, LAPORTE, LIVERMORE, TOP STORIES · ADD COMMENT

The old adage is, “Bourbon is for drinkin’, and water is for fightin’ over.” But apparently before you really get to the fightin’ you’re going to have to do some waitin’.

And it’s that waitin’ part that apparently has U.S. Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, concerned. He says the wait over the Northern Integrated Supply Project has gone on too long, and it’s time for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to finish a nine-year Environmental Impact Study process.

The congressman is currently drafting water-storage legislation to “streamline the approval process for projects like NISP by requiring up or down approval of the plans,” according to a statement from his office. “This will ensure that these projects don’t drag on for decades and waste millions of dollars.

“The unpredictable nature of snowpack and rainfall in Colorado underscores the need for more water storage in good years, so we are better prepared for the bad ones,” Gardner said. “NISP would provide the water storage we need to support northern Colorado’s growing communities and provide protection to farmers and families when the weather turns dry.”

It has been a substantial, though certainly not unprecedented, wait on the NISP project, and it has so far cost the 15 participants, including the Fort Collins, Loveland Water, Central Weld and Left Hand water districts, some \$11 million. But without doubt it is also a substantial project, with a primary focus on building the off-channel, 170,000-acre-foot Glade Reservoir (larger than Horsetooth Reservoir) north of the intersection of U.S. 287 and Colorado 14. The project also includes the 44,000-acre-foot Galeton Reservoir east of Ault, where South Platte River water could be stored.

The primary focus of the project is to capture water during wet years to provide about 40,000 acre feet of firm yield for the water districts and smaller municipalities stretching from Severance and Eaton to Erie and Lafayette. It comes with an estimated price tag of \$490 million, and some hefty environmental costs, said Laura Belanger, the water resources engineer with Western Resource Advocates in Boulder.

“Depleting the Poudre River of peak flows will have a tremendous impact on the river, but we are also concerned about the price of the project for residents when there are many less-costly options to pursue,” Belanger said.

WRA believes a course of water conservation, reuse of municipal water and transfer and coordinated use of agricultural water could provide the same amount of water while maintaining the riparian ecosystem of the Poudre. In addition, Belanger said Harvey Economics, the firm that developed the draft EIS for NISP, inflated both the population growth for the area and residents' expected water usage.

But file those under things that we are waiting to fight about, because what is really holding up the project is not those numbers, but concern over the lack of coordination between NISP and another project proposed by the cities of Fort Collins and Greeley, enlargement of the Halligan and Milton-Seaman Reservoirs on the North Fork of the Poudre.

Enlargement of these two on-channel reservoirs could store more than 40,000 acre feet of water, which would also deplete runoff on the lower Poudre. Essentially, the ruling on the draft EIS was that the NISP project had to coordinate data formats with those from the Halligan-Seaman enlargements, giving everyone a clearer picture on the future of the river.

So that required a supplemental draft EIS, said Eric Wilkinson, the executive director of the Northern Water Conservancy District, which coordinates the NISP project and the EIS process for the 15 participants.

"The process can be frustrating," Wilkinson admits. "You have the folks out in Fort Lupton and Fort Morgan — those cities are really the ones concerned about the water coming out of residents' taps."

Still, Wilkinson said there often isn't much choice, given the highly detailed analysis that must be completed.

"It takes time and it takes money to do," he said. "It is driven by the degree of specificity of that analysis and obviously one of the driving factors is the defendability" of the analysis.

But often, he said, going into that level of detail can also bring some degree of partnership between competing organizations. That was the case with the Windy Gap firming project, which is nearing a final EIS approval after nine years, despite the initial opposition of Western Slope organizations.

"We developed an IGA with Grand County and the Colorado River Water Conservation District," Wilkinson said. "With the work we completed (on the EIS) were able to move forward with discussion of details on the project mitigation."

Wilkinson said he would welcome such discussions with interested parties in the NISP project, including Greeley, Fort Collins and the WRA, as well as rafting, fishing and wildlife advocates.

But a lot of water may still have to pass under the bridge before NISP reaches that point, and Belanger wondered if Gardner is seeking to limit public comment. But not all water supply improvements need take so long, she pointed out.

"With the drought we're experiencing, rather than putting all their eggs in the NISP basket, participating communities could instead be developing the supplies we propose incrementally to help meet current and future demands including providing drought protection for years like this," Belanger said.