

Gardner hopes to hurry Corps of Engineers along



NISP includes plans for a reservoir in this area north of Fort Collins. Courtesy Northern Colorado Water Conservancy

[Steve Lynn](#)

Eight years have passed since the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District applied to the federal government for a permit to build the Northern Integrated Supply Project.

Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, thinks that's too long, which is why he is drafting legislation to set deadlines for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in its evaluation of reservoir projects.

“The concept is to put some time parameters around project approvals or denials,” Gardner told the Business Report

recently, “to make sure the agencies and the permitting processes are either approving or denying the permits in a timely manner.”

Whether Gardner's legislation actually gains traction remains to be seen. While he's seeking bipartisan support for the bill, some consider his efforts a waste of time.

“The thing that concerns me about all these ideas is we're wasting energy and time that could and should be put into implementing projects that we could do now,” said Jason Bane, spokesman for Western Resource Advocates, an environmental group.

The heightened sense of urgency to take some kind of action has come from the drought. Also, a recently released study from the Colorado Water Conservation Board showed a projected shortage of more than 3.2 million acre-feet of Colorado River water by 2060. The study suggests water-storage and conservation as options to shore up the supply gap.

Western Resources Advocates, for one, believes NISP deserves plenty of scrutiny, said Laura Belanger, water resources engineer for the group.

Contending that NISP would diminish Poudre River flows, the Boulder-based environmental group has proposed an alternative plan to NISP in its report, “A Better Future.” It emphasizes water conservation to meet future water demand.

Northern Water counters that a growing population will require additional reservoirs and that conservation alone won't be enough to satisfy demand.

Regardless of their respective claims, the environmental impact statement evaluation conducted by the Corps of Engineers gives both groups a chance to weigh in on the project.

NISP, led by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, is expected to supply cities and towns with 40,000 acre-feet of water annually if approved by the federal government.

Fifteen participants in the project, which includes cities and water districts, have paid nearly \$10.4 million since 2004 for analysis of the project. The project would include two new reservoirs: Glade Reservoir, at 170,000 acre-feet north of Horsetooth Reservoir, and Galeton Reservoir, which would total 45,000 acre-feet east of Ault.

The Corps says it will complete its supplemental draft environmental impact statement of the water-storage project by next fall. It then will release the environmental impact statement to the public for comment and schedule public hearings. A final decision will follow.

Northern Water spokesman Brian Werner thinks a decision could come in 2014. The water district appreciates Gardner's desire to speed things up, and has offered to help the congressman, he said.

"We reached out to him through his staff and said, 'We're more than willing to talk to you as you put this together,'" Werner said.

Corps of Engineers officials did not respond to requests for comment on how Gardner's legislation would affect its review of reservoir projects.

The agency must walk a fine line. Taking too long to complete an analysis can result in missed opportunities while rushing a review can lead to court battles, said Reagan Waskom, director of the Colorado Water Institute at CSU.

"Ending up in court is not a good outcome," Waskom said. But, "to let it drag on is ridiculous."

If Gardner could find a way to expedite reviews of projects like NISP without sacrificing sound analysis of environmental effects, "I think everybody would be in favor of that," Waskom said.