

Glade will have ecological impacts

LeRoy Poff on behalf of a group of citizen-scientists

The future health of the Poudre River as it flows through Fort Collins is at a crossroads. The proposed Glade Reservoir threatens to change permanently the fundamental nature of the river by siphoning off the high flows that help sustain the river ecosystem.

As a group of citizen-scientists whose research and teaching is focused on the ecology and physical dynamics of rivers, we are compelled to voice concern about these proposed diversions so the public can better understand the ecological impacts of this project.

Like many Western rivers, the Poudre receives the bulk of its annual flow from mountain snowmelt in late spring. These peak flows are essential for rejuvenating and sustaining the river. They flush accumulated silts and nutrients from the channel and restore clean gravel beds essential for spawning fish and the aquatic insects fish eat. They scour and saturate streamside habitats to create the conditions needed to nurture native riparian tree seedlings and to preserve productive wetlands.

The natural ecosystem depends on this ancient cycle of renewal, yet existing diversions already diminish the ability of the average spring peak to reinvigorate the river through Fort Collins and beyond. The proposed additional diversions into Glade Reservoir will further deprive the river of its revitalizing pulses, even in wetter years, predictably leading to the habitat degradation and biological simplification that is so well documented for other Western snowmelt rivers denied their regenerating peak flows.

The Poudre currently suffers from excessive removal of water during many months of the year, and low flow restoration is sorely needed to improve river health. Unfortunately, century-old Colorado water law has failed to protect rivers from being drained during low-flow periods, and it will not protect them from the equally damaging diversion of revitalizing peak flows. Given the many legal and institutional barriers to keeping water in rivers to sustain their ecosystems, the public needs to articulate a shared societal vision for the future health of our rivers.

The Poudre is a defining icon of Fort Collins' cultural heritage. Many in Northern Colorado feel a deep personal connection to the river and a sense of stewardship for her. We should ask ourselves: What river heritage will we bequeath to our children and to their children's children? Is your own vision guided by the principle of a vital river corridor, where spring peak flows benefit and sustain a dynamic aquatic and riparian ecosystem with its associated cultural amenities? Or do you envision the Poudre as a static, legally dewatered irrigation ditch where the only flows allowed are those that cannot otherwise be profitably diverted?

Both ecosystem science and common sense logically lead to this conclusion: The proposed siphoning of the river's rejuvenating peak flows into Glade Reservoir will greatly increase the cumulative impact of human-caused stress on the Poudre. Moreover, these additional diversions risk a permanent transformation of the river into an ecologically dysfunctional shadow of her former self.

For those who envision a healthy river in the future, now is the time to speak out for scientifically informed stewardship of the Poudre. Contact the Fort Collins City Council (221-6878; <http://fcgov.com/council>). Consider submitting some comments on the Corps of Engineers' recently released Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Decisions to be made in the coming weeks will determine the river's destiny for generations to come. For the Poudre, this crossroads affords no turning back.

This Soapbox was submitted by LeRoy Poff on behalf of Brian Bledsoe, Will Clements, Kurt Fausch, Boris Kondratieff, David Merritt, Sara Rathburn, Michael Scott and Ellen Wohl. They are Ph.D. scientists who live and work in Fort Collins.

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