

Northern Colorado BUSINESS REPORT

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Glade would change downtown river flow

By Steve Porter

FORT COLLINS - Everyone agrees that Glade Reservoir, if built, could have a dramatic effect on the Cache la Poudre River as it flows through Fort Collins.

But could that effect be mitigated - or even improved - through a series of hydrologic adjustments made possible by the reservoir?

The draft Environmental Impact Statement prepared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers indicates the river's flow could be reduced by more than 70 percent annually in May and by more than half in June as water is diverted at the mouth of Poudre Canyon to fill and maintain the proposed 170,000-acre-foot reservoir.

Opponents of the project say the river is already suffering - going practically dry in many months - and further reductions of flow would kill it.

"The Poudre River is currently severely degraded, with 60 percent of its water taken out before it gets to town," said Gary Wockner, spokesman for the Save the Poudre Coalition and a member of Fort Collins' Water Board. "Our goal is to save the Poudre and have water in the river year round and have a healthy peak flow."

Save the Poudre is the most vocal opponent of the \$400-plus-million project being proposed by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. Wockner said the group is concerned about the health of the Poudre River from the mouth of the canyon to its confluence with the South Platte River east of Greeley. But their main focus is on the portion that runs through Fort Collins.

Pledged to try

For its part, the water district has pledged to try to develop partnerships with municipalities and ditch companies that divert water from the river upstream and within the city to keep water flowing.

In Chapter 5 of the draft EIS, the district is said to be seeking an agreement with Lake Canal Co. - a local ditch company supplying irrigation water - to have the company change its point of water diversion from upstream to downstream of the city.

"The District will also explore agreements with other water providers to re-time their direct flow rights by temporarily storing water in Glade Reservoir and/or its forebay for release during late July and August," the report states. "Such agreements would add to the flows of the Poudre River through Fort Collins during the summer."

Carl Brouwer, manager of the water district's Northern Integrated Supply Project, said the mention of Lake Canal Co. in the report was made last summer, and since then the company has cooled on such an agreement but still has not ruled it out.

Brouwer said such arrangements will likely prove difficult at best. "We're committed enough that

it's in the EIS," he said. "It's just not idle talk. But we need to get something that's mutually beneficial to them and us."

Brouwer notes that the Poudre River as it flows above and through Fort Collins is "an amazingly intricate network of irrigation companies and municipalities with all these (water right) priority dates and they're all over the place." But he says the district intends to do its best to find a way to make a constant stream flow in the Poudre work.

"There are ways, we think, with lots of (water) exchanges, that would take cooperation to do," he said. "But we are exploring some of those options as to what if?"

City a major player

One major player in developing such agreements will be the city of Fort Collins itself. While not one of the 15 participants signed up to receive NISP water, the city has a strong interest in maintaining the health of the Poudre, having spent millions in developing bike paths and amenities along the river. It also views the river as an economic engine for future downtown business growth.

John Stokes, Natural Resources Department director, said the city is spending about \$760,000 to study how the NISP proposal would affect it. The results of those studies will be included in comments submitted to the Corps of Engineers at the end of the public comment period, now scheduled for July 30.

Stokes noted that the city has been working with Colorado State University through the UniverCity Connections partnership to find ways to improve the city's economic health. "One of their goals is to maintain a vibrant river flow through the town," he said.

The city is also considering three reports on the Poudre River, including one by CSU economist John Loomis, which concluded after a survey of 332 Fort Collins households that residents would pay a median of \$234 per year to avoid a 50 percent reduction in river flows during spring and summer.

Loomis said extrapolating that data results in millions of dollars in economic benefits contributed by a healthy flowing river. "When the median and mean (willingness to pay) are generalized to the percentage of households in Fort Collins that responded to the survey, it yields annual benefits of \$8.5 million to \$12.7 million," the report states.

Stokes said the Loomis report provides the city with some good data on how important the river is to local residents. "Putting a monetary value on it shows how important it is to the citizens of the city," he said. "People, as it turns out, place a high value on the river. It gives us a strong indication of the value of the river corridor to the community, and it's good to know there's data to support that."

The city is one of the biggest diverters of water out of the river. "The city of Fort Collins has a role to play in this as well," says Brouwer, who notes Fort Collins is responsible for something less than half of the water diverted below the canyon mouth.

The city of Greeley is another big diverter of Poudre water, taking it east through a pipeline near Laporte instead of letting it flow through Fort Collins and on to Greeley.

Boulder Creek model?

Brouwer said the region already has an example of how a constant stream flow can be achieved through town in what the city of Boulder accomplished in 1993. "They've worked out the kind of thing we're talking about here," he said. "It can be done."

Carol Ellinghouse, Boulder Water Utilities water resources coordinator, said the city worked with the Colorado Water Conservation Board and was able to get an in-stream flow decree from Colorado Water Court to keep a constant flow in Boulder Creek as it passes through that city.

Ellinghouse said the city donated \$12 million worth of water rights to keep the creek a major downtown attraction, including serving as the background to the annual Boulder Creek Festival.

She said the result has been a feature that attracts visitors and pleases downtown business people. "We even have people down there fly fishing on their lunch hour," she said.

Ellinghouse admitted that "there is a financial trade-off" to achieve a free-flowing creek through town and noted that having an upstream storage reservoir - as Glade could be - "really was the key to this."

But she said city residents have no regrets about making the investment. "I don't think you would find anyone who thinks it was a bad idea."

Stokes said the city of Fort Collins would be interested in finding out if a similar result could be achieved with the Poudre. "I think potentially we would be," he said. "Right now we're taking a close look at the draft EIS and the part that's directed toward mitigation and what might be done to enhance flow. The whole mitigation question is really important to the city."

Wockner said he's also interested in looking closely at the Boulder experience, which he called "an extraordinary idea." But it will take a lot of cooperation, he said.

"It's certainly absolutely possible," he said. "We're absolutely an advocate of getting all these entities together to sit down to find ways to help restore the river."