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Heated Glade Reservoir debate shows many have something at stake



Rep. John Kefalas, D-Fort Collins, speaks to representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during a hearing on the proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project. Kefalas asked for a 90-day extension of the public comment period. (Photo/Jason Kosena)

By [Jason Kosena](#) 06/18/2008 | [1 Comment](#)

It would be a water storage project of monster proportions, bigger than anything seen in Northern Colorado in decades.

Some are calling the \$405 million plan imperative, while others classify it as a deathblow to the environment and a fragile aquatic ecosystem.

Called the Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP), the proposed massive water project would supply 15 communities in four counties with enough water to sustain expected population growth for years to come.



It would also result in the construction of a 170,000-acre-foot reservoir near the landmark Ted's Place northwest of Fort Collins, requiring a complete rerouting of Colorado Highway 287 and submerging thousands of acres of Colorado landscape.

The debate between conservationists and growing communities that see no other possible

option played out in an emotional, five-hour public hearing Monday night in Fort Collins when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which drafts the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) needed for the project's final approval, accepted public comment.

Feeding the thirst

The proposed 170,000-acre-foot Glade Reservoir – larger than the 156,735-acre-foot capacity of Horsetooth Reservoir southwest of Fort Collins – would use water developed from rights in the Poudre and South Platte rivers. In addition, the project would construct a secondary reservoir, Galetton, on the Eastern Plains.

Once constructed, Galetton would be roughly one-fourth the size of the currently planned Glade Reservoir. By comparison, Dillon Reservoir in Summit County, which feeds water to Denver, holds 252,000 acre-feet.

Supporters who want to build the reservoirs say the project would supply more than 40,000 acre-feet of water a year to growing communities, according to the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, that serves the 15 municipalities pushing the project. An acre-foot can supply roughly two urban households with water for a year.

Slurped up to irrigate many Northern Colorado farms and ranches and to supply cities like Fort Collins and Greeley with drinking water, the Poudre River's stream flow is currently all but dedicated to existing water rights more than 100 years old. The proposed use of the last available flows is being seen by some as the most controversial aspect of the project.

Because water rights used to supply the Northern Integrated Supply Project are junior in nature, they could only be pulled from the "top of the river" during spring runoff, when flows are high.

If annual flow couldn't satisfy senior rights then water could not be pulled from the river -- a reality its proponents expect will happen at least four times a decade.

In years of high runoff, the project could result in a reduction in the amount of water flowing down the Poudre River through Fort Collins and areas on the Eastern Plains by as much as 71 percent, based on monthly averages, according to a draft EIS released by the Corps on April 30. That reality — a robust river dwindling to a veritable trickle — has raised red flags.

"I have some fairly deep concerns about this project because I believe it could have a detrimental impact to the health and long-term stability of the Poudre River as we know it," said state Rep. Randy Fischer, D-Fort Collins, a water engineer by trade, on Monday night. "Anything we do to the river should be to improve it — and not to its detriment."

But reservoir supporters, including elected officials from the 15 communities who would be the beneficiaries of the water, said they are ready to accept the likely environmental impact incurred because they see "no other option" for their residents.

"If a community as small as ours were to acquire future water supplies on its own we would have to purchase agricultural water or rely on scarce groundwater," said Mayor Wade Carlson of Dacono, a small town north of Denver along the Interstate 25 corridor. "While the impacts of NISP are not inconsequential, they are less than many of the other alternatives considered and less than the proliferation of many small water storage projects that would be needed for the (15) communities to grow."

Gearing up to dish it out

Although the Corps supported the project in its draft EIS, a host of required mitigations would likely be required for the project to move forward. For many involved, that is where the attention is now.



Likely opponents to the project, including the cities of Fort Collins, Greeley and a well-organized citizen group called "Save the Poudre," are gearing teams of engineers and lawyers to comb the draft EIS in order to submit a clear picture of the potential impacts each expects to incur.

Last month, the Fort Collins City Council approved nearly \$800,000 in city funds to study the draft statement and asked the Corps for a 90-day extension of the public comment period to plow through the 700-page report.

State lawmakers, including Fischer and Democrat Rep. John Kefalas, have also asked for an extension of the comment period, calling the result "detrimental" to Colorado.

The Poudre River runs through Kefalas' House District 52 in Old Town Fort Collins where city officials, business leaders and Colorado State University have worked in recent years to develop a "riverfront" atmosphere supporting the arts and culture along the Poudre's banks.

Recreational water sport activities like a proposed kayak park could be at risk if reduced flows become a staple during some summer months, city officials told the Corps Monday night.

Because of large irrigation ditches that pull river water west of town, the Poudre often already runs completely dry during winter months in Fort Collins.

"This is a key issue to all residents of Northern Colorado," Kefalas said. "We shouldn't rush to any answers, and that is why I asked for an extension."

Meanwhile, much of the agricultural community, including members of the state's Farm Board and Rep. Don Marostica, R-Loveland, have expressed concern that without new water storage in Northern Colorado thousands of acres of agriculture is at risk due to growing communities buying senior water rights owned by farms.

This is the first in three-part series exploring the proposed NISP water project in Northern Colorado. Coming up next:

-- *The 15 communities who would benefit from the project say this is their only option. Why? We'll take a look at the potential impact on agriculture in the area, what kind of growth are they expecting, and other possible alternatives.*

-- *Environmentalists say this project would serve a deathblow to the Poudre River. Part three of the series will explore the impacts of a massive reservoir on the environment and on the animals and people living near it.*

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coyotegulch

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Jason,

Nice synopsis of the project and the issues. I'm looking forward to your next two articles.

John Orr (Coyote Gulch)

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