

NISP costs to date: \$10M and climbing



[Steve Lynn](#)

The region's cities and towns are spending millions of tax dollars to help the federal government study how the Northern Integrated Supply Project might affect the Cache la Poudre River.

The 15 participants in the project, which includes communities and water districts, have paid nearly \$10.4 million since 2004 for analysis of the project, according to records provided to the Business Report by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District.

Their contribution is required by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as part of its study of the project, which is expected to supply participants with 40,000 acre feet of water annually if approved. An acre-foot is the amount of water required to fill an acre one foot deep and is enough to supply 2.5 households annually.

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. Two water pumping stations and pipelines also would be built.

The project would give towns like Erie a big boost to accommodate their growth. The town of nearly 20,000 has paid out \$1.7 million so far, the most of any participant in the project.

The town expects to pay a total of \$79.3 million for the project if it's approved. It has 3,900 acre-feet of water available to it now; the project would give it another 6,500 acre-feet.

Erie needs the water because it projects its population will grow to 40,000 by 2025. It will need 12,500 acre-feet to serve that population, said Gary Behlen, Erie Public Works director.

"As our population grows, as our economic base grows, we need to plan accordingly," town spokesman Fred Diehl said. The project "is a vital component of that plan."

The money used to fund the project comes from the town's water fund, which draws revenue from building permit fees and water users, town officials said.

Similarly, Windsor expects eventually to grow to 60,000 people and will need an additional 3,300 acre-feet from the project, Town Board member Jeremy Rose said.

"Every little bit helps," he said. "That's certainly enough to cover helping out our farmers and a lot of households."

Windsor had a population of 18,600 in 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Next year, it will spend \$83,000 in general fund money to help pay for the project.

Contributions by participants are proportional to the amount of water they will receive. The money so far has gone to the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which first submitted an application for the project from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2004.

Supporters, who believe the project is needed for growth and to ensure adequate water supplies during drought, say the project has taken far too long. They have held rallies over the years, most recently last month, to back the project.

The Corps released its first environmental impact statement in 2008. Four years later, it continues to study the project.

Participants are frustrated because the project continues to face delays, Weld County Commissioner Sean Conway said.

"Quite frankly, people are losing confidence in the Corps' ability to essentially do their job," Conway said.

The Corps of Engineers acknowledges that the project has moved slower than expected as it studies five major projects in the Poudre River Basin.

Gov. John Hickenlooper wrote a letter in May asking about the status of the project and added that he hoped that the Corps "is making this project a high priority."

Corps Col. Robert Ruch responded in a June letter that the level of effort required to study the project, in conjunction with two other projects, the Halligan and Seaman Water Supply Projects, had led to the delay.

Ruch estimated that the Northern Integrated Supply Project supplemental environmental impact statement would be released to the public next fall, and the draft environmental impact statement for the two other projects would be released in the summer of 2014.

Ruch also acknowledged "concerns regarding potential cumulative impacts to the Cache la Poudre River."

Chandler Peter, the Corps' National Environmental Policy Act coordinator, explained that the agency is conducting a meticulous evaluation of how withdrawing water from the Poudre River would reduce its flows. Afterward, it will evaluate the effects of the three projects on Poudre River water quality, fisheries, vegetation and wetlands.

"The issues that we're dealing with and the resources we're dealing with are complex and sophisticated," he said. "That all takes time and money to be able to ensure that we do a thorough evaluation before we make a decision."

Water and government officials believe that the Corps of Engineers fears a lawsuit regardless of whether it allows the project to move forward.

"They realize that whatever decision they make, whether they agree to grant the permit, they're going to get sued," Conway said.

Controversy surrounding the project has created additional work, Peter acknowledged.

The project has drawn criticism from Fort Collins environmental group Save the Poudre, which contends the project would drain the Poudre River. The project, it claims, would suck 1,000 cubic feet per second from the river during peak June flows, depleting the river through Fort Collins by as much as 71 percent.

Meanwhile, Weld farmers have struggled to maintain their crops during the drought. Crop insurance claims are up, people in the industry say, despite overflowing groundwater wells that remain shut off to Weld farmers.

Water district spokesman Brian Werner said he believes that the spending by cities and the lengthy process are typical of Northern Colorado water storage projects, which can take decades to complete.

"I'm trying to keep, I guess, an even keel and remind ourselves that these do take time, as much as we'd like to speed the process up," he said.

Divide and conquer

Fifteen municipalities and water districts are splitting the costs of NISP. Here's a breakdown of how much each has so far kicked in and their share of the total project costs:

~~Participant: Contribution 2004-2012 - Projected project cost~~

Central Weld Water District: \$1.3 million - \$42.7 million

Frederick: \$400,000 - \$31.7 million

Firestone: \$195,000 - \$15.9 million

Dacano: \$150,000 - \$12.2 million

Eaton: \$369,000 - \$15.9 million

Erie: \$1.7 million - \$79.3 million

Evans: \$407,000 - \$19.5 million

Fort Collins Loveland Water District: \$779,000 - \$36.6 million

Fort Lupton: \$780,000 - \$36.6 million

Fort Morgan: \$982,000 - \$43.9 million

Lafayette: \$469,000 - \$22 million

Left Hand Water District: \$1.3 million - \$59.8 million

Morgan County Quality Water District: \$369,000 - \$15.9 million

Severance: \$369,000 - \$15.9 million

Windsor: \$854,000 - \$40.3 million

Total: \$10.4 million - \$488.2 million

What's next

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers says it will complete its supplemental draft environmental impact statement of the Northern Integrated Supply Project by fall next year.

The Corps then will release it to the public for comment and schedule public hearings. A final decision will follow.