



NISP group to push for support for water project

By JOHN BRENNAN/Times Editor
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A large water storage project in which Fort Morgan is a participant will be going through another round of environmental impact studies and comments.

The 15 participants in the Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP) plan to take a more proactive and aggressive approach to generating support than they did the first time around.

NISP will be going through a supplemental draft environmental impact statement (EIS) process, Carl Brouwer of the Northern Water Conservancy District told the Fort Morgan Water Advisory Board at its meeting Thursday.

That process, which involves more study of specific issues raised in the initial draft EIS process as well as another round of public comments and hearings, will delay the project, said Brouwer, the project manager for NISP.

Under a previous timeline, Northern Water had projected starting construction in 2011, but that has been pushed back until at least 2013, Brouwer said.

The supplemental draft EIS should be completed late this year or in early 2010, he said, with the comment period likely to be in the spring of '10. The NCWCD now hopes to have a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers by the end of 2010.

Two of the biggest opponents to NISP have been the city of Fort Collins and the EPA, according to Brouwer.

Fort Collins claimed that if NISP were built, the city would have to spend some \$200 million on improvements to its water and wastewater treatment facilities, among other things, he said. But Northern Water recently completed its own study of the issues cited by Fort Collins and found the cost to the city would be almost zero, he said.

That study was performed by Black & Veatch, an engineering firm that has done extensive work for the city of Fort Collins, Brouwer noted.

He added that NCWCD recently received a letter from the city of Fort Collins — “the first of its kind,” Brouwer said — saying city officials wanted to talk to Northern Water about NISP.

“The door has been completely closed, and now there’s a little light shining through the crack,” Brouwer said.

While the delay pushes back Fort Morgan's financial obligation for NISP — projected at more than \$36 million over the next 14 years — the uncertainty of whether NISP will ever actually be built leaves the city wondering about its water future.

Mayor Jack Darnell said at Thursday's meeting that his question is whether Fort Morgan needs to be more aggressive in buying up more Colorado-Big Thompson water, which is most of its current supply.

"Should we go out and get a loan to buy more?" Darnell asked Brouwer.

Darnell said the city has been budgeting for about \$500,000 a year to buy C-BT water, which will only buy 40 to 60 units.

At that rate, Darnell said, "it will take a long time to get where we need to be."

Brouwer said Fort Morgan's long-range water needs, including new growth, have been estimated at about 9,500 acre-feet, and the city currently owns rights to about half that amount.

C-BT units are roughly an acre-foot each, but because those units are distributed subject to annual "quotas" based on snowpack, runoff and other factors, each unit yields only a percentage of an acre-foot that can vary from 40 to 70 percent.

Brouwer said the city might need about 9,000 more C-BT units to meet its long-range needs.

"My advice is to continue to pick up those units as you can and as you can afford them," Brouwer said. "But NISP is something you want to stay in."

Fort Morgan would get about 3,600 acre-feet — without quotas — from NISP, in which it is the third-largest participant in terms of investment and share of water, according to figures presented by Brouwer.

Brouwer also mentioned that if an Army Corps permit is denied, the Glade Reservoir portion of NISP could be moved to Cactus Hill, which the Corps has said is "non-jurisdictional" and would not require a permit.

"So there is an option we've looked at that could be done without a permit," he said.

Members of the water advisory board and some city officials have said in the past that the only choice for now is to "stay in both games," continuing to buy as much C-BT water as possible and also working to support NISP.

That support should include promoting the need for NISP with the general public as well as new federal lawmakers who have recently taken office, including U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet and Rep. Betsy Markey.

"The new posture of NISP participants is to be more proactive in support of the project," Floyd Ciruli of Ciruli Associates, a polling firm working with Northern Water, said at Thursday's meeting.

Ciruli conducted a survey of residents in Weld and Larimer counties last August that showed overwhelming support for NISP. He said that survey was part of the new proactive approach of generating and building public support for the project.

Ciruli also pointed out that he has been involved with a number of projects that had to make it through

an EIS process, and they always generate substantial comment and opposition.

“That’s not unusual,” Ciruli said. “That’s the process, that’s how it works.”

Brouwer said the 15 NISP participants, which include municipalities as well as water districts including Morgan County Quality Water, will soon be asked to become part of a formal association that will work for approval of the permit.

“The message will be to let the science work and protect the Corps from the politics,” he said.

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