

NISP: Half full or half empty?

By Gene Sears
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The following is the first in a series of articles concerning the Northern Integrated Supply Project.

To some, the birth of the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP, realizes a long-standing desire to equip multiple Front Range municipalities with the water needed going forward into the new millennium.

To the 15 water providers invested in NISP, the project is a cost-effective measure that allows future growth while sustaining the needs of residents already within city or district boundaries.

To many of these communities, the alternatives to NISP are far more difficult to swallow, ranging from steadily increasing water fees to the loss of agricultural land due to "buying and drying," a process in which farmland is converted to alternatives uses without irrigation demands.

To opponents, NISP represents all that is wrong with the non-stop development of the Front Range, where the sanctity of untamed river flows gives way to urbanization, trading pristine riparian environments for subdivisions, serenity for Starbucks.

Providing ammunition to both sides of the debate, the U.S. Army Corps released a long-anticipated draft environmental impact study April 30, paving the way for a pair of sure-to-be contested public hearings.

The first meeting, June 17 at the Fort Collins Senior Center, runs from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. as an open house, prior to switching to the public hearing format at 6 p.m. The second, June 19 at the UNC University Center in Greeley, runs from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. as an open house before switching to the hearing at 7 p.m. The full text of the draft EIS is available online at: <https://www.nwo.usace.army.mil/html/od-tl/eis-info.htm>

What it is

The Northern Integrated Water Supply Project is a proposed \$405 million regional water supply project under the oversight of the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District on behalf of the 15-member group of investors, including the city of Fort Lupton. Under the project, the NCWCD plans to develop a pair of reservoirs totaling roughly 210,000 acre-feet, one located northwest of Fort Collins, one located east of the town of Ault. The first, Glade Reservoir, is slated to occupy a five-mile long swath along U.S. Highway 287 north of Fort Collins, necessitating a relocation of seven miles of the road surface. NCWCD intends to fill the 170,000 acre-foot basin with Poudre River water using the existing Poudre canal system, a measure intended to negate the need for new control structures along the river.

The second site, Galeton Reservoir, would be roughly 10 miles due east of Ault. The 40,000 acre-foot reservoir seeks to divert water from the South Platte River at a point downstream from Greeley. The water stored in Galeton would then be utilized by agriculture irrigation companies in exchange for the Poudre River water currently in use. According to NCWCD, this "agricultural exchange" results in approximately 60 percent of the water drawn from the Poudre, water that has historically served agricultural needs.

Need

Averaging across the 15 water providers invested in the project, water demand has increased 6 percent annually since 1990. During that same approximate timeframe, the populations served have doubled, with a projected 2.8 million new residents envisioned by 2030. According to NCWCD, more than 75 percent of the providers will begin experiencing water shortages by 2010. Those shortages would lead to the 'drying up' of agricultural land throughout the region.

In statements published in the draft EIS regarding the NISP project, failure to institute the NISP project or alternative would remove over 69,000 acres of agricultural land, or 11 percent of the total irrigated land in the region, from irrigation. In addition, the report states that the drying would result in the loss of 1,384 acres of wetlands.

Coming Up

Following April's release of the draft EIS, the document enters a public comment period from May to July 8. In August, the U.S. Army Corps intends to review those comments for integration into the final EIS document, expected by the end of 2008.

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