
Northern Water defends NISP project from Fort Collins council

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FORT COLLINS -- The water authority that hopes to build a massive new reservoir north of Fort Collins shot back Tuesday against the city council's vote to criticize the project.

Brian Werner, spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, said the water district wanted people to know the project would not cost Fort Collins millions of dollars, as the city said it could last week.

"We're hearing from too many people that they've bought into that, that it's going to cost the citizens of Fort Collins hundreds of millions of dollars," he said. "It's not going to cost hundreds of millions. That's probably our bottom line."

Should Glade Reservoir require Fort Collins water treatment facilities to be upgraded, the people paying for Glade would pay for that, too, Werner said.

The issue is about the Northern Integrated Supply Project, also known as the Glade Reservoir project, which would take water out of the Cache la Poudre River in its high-flow season and put it into a new reservoir. Glade, which would be located along the Great Hogback north of Ted's Place and which would require the relocation of several miles of U.S. 287, would provide new water storage for anticipated growth on the northern Front Range.

Advocates say the goal is to prevent farms in Weld County from drying up, their water demanded by thirsty growing communities.

But opponents, who include conservation groups and environmental advocates, say the harm to the Poudre's ecosystems and Fort Collins' economy would be too great.

In a 15-page report prepared for the city council last week, Fort Collins city staff estimated that Glade-spurred upgrades to wastewater and water treatment facilities could cost between \$75 million and \$125 million.

Fort Collins discharges its treated sewer water into the river, so if there was less water in the river to combine with it, that could force changes to the system. What's more, the city's water treatment plant could require upgrades if water from Glade, which would contain a frothy mix of spring snowmelt full of organic matter, is mixed with water in Horsetooth, which is somewhat clearer.

Werner disputed the city's claims about those changes and added that if they proved necessary, the 15 communities that want to build Glade would have to pay for them.

"If there are costs associated with it, for, let's say, advanced treatment systems, that's a project cost. That will be part of permit conditions," he said. "We want the people of Fort Collins to understand they're not going to have to pay for that."

But the Army Corps of Engineers' draft environmental impact statement doesn't say that directly, which city officials cited as a chief concern.

John Stokes, director of Fort Collins' Natural Resources Department, said estimates of water infrastructure improvements and associated costs should be addressed in a separate environmental impact statement.

"In any permitting process, we would be seeking binding commitments from the Army Corps of Engineers and the proponents to indemnify the city against any fiscal damage, or, for that matter, other kinds of damages, to quality of life issues, wildlife and vegetation," he said. "Right now there is nothing in the written record, in their permit application, that would lead us to believe that we would be indemnified from financial harm."

The city has 14 "themes" it will include in its formal comments to the Army Corps, which will be submitted by the end of the week, Stokes said. They include effects on water infrastructure but also on the local economy and on the environment in the river corridor.

On Tuesday, Werner challenged one other issue: Fort Collins officials' concern that water from Glade will taint the water in Horsetooth, the city's main drinking water supply. He said that would only happen if a pipeline is built between the two reservoirs, which is not a sure thing.

Werner also added that correspondence from the city has been null since the environmental study was released April 30, but Northern Water hopes to work with the city to address its concerns.

They'll have to do so before the project can move forward. The Army Corps must react to every substantive question raised during the past few months, according to federal law.

Stokes said that's exactly the point.

"Part of the reason for the process is to reveal issues and disagreements just like this," he said. "This is how this process is actually supposed to work. You are supposed to put out a proposal, and people have a chance to critique it, and based on that critique, we continue to have a process or a dialogue to resolve some of these issues."

About NISP

« The Northern Integrated Supply Project includes Glade and Galeton reservoirs. Glade Reservoir, at 170,000 acre-feet capacity, is slightly larger than Horsetooth Reservoir.

« Construction of Glade will require the relocation of seven miles of U.S. 287 northwest of Fort Collins.

« Galeton Reservoir, located northeast of Greeley, will provide local farmers with new water from the South Platte River. In exchange, the farmers will allow Glade Reservoir to use Poudre River water to which they are entitled.

« The project includes 15 communities and water districts and is estimated at more than \$400 million.

« If given the green light, the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District estimates Glade could be finished by 2016.

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