

Old-fashioned water fight brews in Colorado

Environmentalists and growing communities prepare to square off over a proposed dam on the Cache la Poudre River.

By Nicholas Riccardi, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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FORT COLLINS, COLO. -- When it starts at 10,000 feet and slices through the mountains in the canyon that bears its name, the Cache la Poudre River is a shock of water in this dry land.

But by the time it winds its way out to this laid-back college city of 120,000 people, most of its water has been grabbed by farmers and other cities that control the maze of canals and diversion dams that turn the river into a trickle.



Source: Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District
MATT MOODY Los Angeles Times
MAP

Now a new dam and reservoir project could pull even more water out of the river before it reaches Fort Collins. A key juncture in the process comes this month, when the Army Corps of Engineers releases an environmental impact statement that will determine if and how the \$400-million project can proceed.

Both sides expect the Corps to sign off on the proposal and are bracing for an old-fashioned showdown over that most precious of resources -- water.

"Mark Twain said of the West that whiskey's for drinking and water's for fighting, and that applies here," said Fort Collins Mayor Doug Hutchinson.

The Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which is spearheading the project in partnership with 15 cities and communities that want the water, says the reservoir and dam are the most environmentally and economically sensitive ways to deal with water needs in the booming area.

"The 15 participants have done their homework; they've decided it's economically viable for them," said Brian Warner, a spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. "They need water in the future. Heck,

they need water yesterday."

Opponents, mainly environmentalists who argue that Fort Collins deserves as much river water as possible since it's closest to the source, contend the project is a boondoggle that could deal a death blow to the Poudre.

"We thought the era of big dams was over," said Will Walters of the Sierra Club's Fort Collins-area chapter. "Turns out there are still some holdouts."

The project's proponents bristle at those arguments. They note that 20 years ago, when they first proposed the dam, it was to be located right on the Poudre. But they were persuaded that it was destructive, Warner said, and they now call for pumping water from the river to a 6-mile-long reservoir in an isolated valley, rather than blockading the main river.

"We live here," Warner said from the district offices in the city of Berthoud, 29 miles from Fort Collins. "We're not out to ruin the river."

"The river has been dried up for 150 years because it's been used for 150 years," he said.

Colorado is one of two states that has all its fresh water originate within its borders (the other is Hawaii). Like most Western states, it parcels out rights to water based on seniority of the claimant, not necessarily proximity to rivers or lakes.

Between the mouth of Cache la Poudre Canyon and its junction with the South Platte River, 60 miles east, lie 24 diversion structures, typically dam and canal combinations. This network sends the river water to its historical owners, mainly farmers on Colorado's eastern plains.

The new project would be supplying water to the river's other users -- a ring of fast-growing communities that hug the northern edge of Denver's sprawl. It would take about 40,000 acre-feet from the river annually. An acre-foot is the common measure of water, consisting of an acre of water a foot deep.

Gary Wockner, an environmental activist who is helping lead the fight against the project, peered last week into one of the diversion channels -- a ditch known as the New Cache Canal off a dirt road just west of Fort Collins. A steady, clear stream flowed down the channel, carrying a pair of ducks.

"There's more water in this canal than there is in the river," Wockner said.

A few minutes later, he pulled his van over at the edge of a chunk of open space the city had purchased along the willow-lined banks of the Poudre and strolled down a dirt trail to the riverbed.

He walked across three-quarters of the riverbed -- nothing more than smooth, dry stones -- to the thin line of water that made up the Poudre. It is here, he said, that he takes his two young daughters to go inner-tubing during the few months the river flows high enough to enjoy, May through July.

Wockner and other opponents of the project argue that there is plenty of water in reservoirs on the eastern plains to meet the region's growth needs. The water district's clients should buy that water rather than drain the Poudre more, they contend.

Warner, however, said that would be prohibitively expensive. He added that 60% of the water that would go into the new reservoir was already being taken from the river; the district will just divert it to its own storage area. And the water will only be pumped from the Poudre during the peak flow months.

He also noted that, even if the dam and reservoir were not built, the district still had the rights to the water, and fast-growing communities in northern Colorado needed it.

"Whether this project's built or not," Warner said, "that's not going to go away."

nicholas.riccardi@ latimes.com