

Plan for massive new reservoir delayed again

Ryan Maye Handy, *The Coloradoan* 11:15 p.m. MST November 8, 2014



(Photo: Moore, Erika)

One hundred-forty years ago, Northern Colorado residents were bitterly divided over sharing the Poudre River, a battle that laid the foundation for water law and rights in the West.

Today, water is still worth fighting over in Larimer and Weld counties.

While the modern struggle over Glade Reservoir — which would divert Poudre water into a lake larger than Horsetooth Reservoir — might not inspire a musket-bearing militia, it could cost hundreds of millions of dollars, and has already sparked two complex environmental studies and angered Poudre River advocates.

Glade Reservoir may be just a plan on paper, but some say it is key to keeping Northern Colorado from drying up in the next few decades. Others contend that the highly controversial reservoir will damage the Poudre, not to mention swallow up acres of land, displace a federal highway and transfigure northern Larimer County's landscape.

But release of a long-awaited environmental study that could pave the way for construction of two new Northern Colorado reservoirs — including Glade — has been postponed until next spring. The delay is the latest stall in an already yearslong battle over expanding Colorado's water storage.

"We need this project and we need it soon," said Carl Brouwer, who has been spear-heading the reservoir project, known as the Northern Integrated Supply Project, for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. "We need this project today."

Northern Water's plan to build Glade and Galeton reservoirs in Northern Colorado was supposed to take a step forward this winter with the release of a second environmental impact statement. But the statement, a supplement to an earlier impact study compiled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2008, has been postponed at least twice.

Now, the study won't be released until possibly spring 2015, said Northern Water spokesman Brian Werner. That means the plan that would add millions of gallons to Northern Colorado's reservoirs to stave off inevitable water loss remains years from realization. Meanwhile, Front Range cities are forced to lease water rights from agriculture in order to make up for water shortages, which continue to grow each year.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been studying the environmental impacts of the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP, for more than a decade and, in 2008, began a second study into the project after public outcry demanded it. The supplemental study has now taken more time to complete than the first draft released in 2008.

But the future of NISP is not entirely dependent on the results of that study — the project is tied to the fates of several other proposed reservoirs in Northern Colorado, all of which are snarled in years of environmental study.

The Army Corps would not confirm that it had officially changed the deadline for the next environmental impact statement but said it is "continuing to work through a deliberative process on the NISP schedule," said spokeswoman Maggie Oldham.

But those in the Colorado water community believe the study won't be released in December or January, as the Corps initially planned. The delay is likely due to the overlap of multiple projects along the Poudre River and their different deadlines.

For those who follow NISP closely, the postponement comes as no surprise.

"NISP has been delayed again, and I do not expect any sort of final decision until 2020," said Gary Wockner, head of the Fort Collins nonprofit Save the Poudre, which has campaigned vehemently against the project. "If any of the participants (in the project) want water, they should move to Plan B as soon as possible."

For Wockner and others who oppose the project, a "Plan B" solution lies in water conservation, not diverting water from natural sources to expanded storage.

Regardless, the way forward for NISP will not be simple, as the project's success depends on the approval of two other potential reservoirs, Halligan and Seaman, both still years away from realization, said Reagan Waskom, director of the Colorado Water Institute.

Northern Water has also yet to acquire all the land necessary to build Glade Reservoir, which would also require the relocation of 7 miles of U.S. Highway 287 north of Fort Collins. But all other elements needed to pull NISP together still await approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Waskom thinks delays on the NISP study can be explained by the complex overlapping of the two water storage projects and a series of staggered deadlines for each.

"You can see why they are having trouble," he said Tuesday. But while the Corps grapples with balancing decisions on NISP and another reservoir project, the gap between Colorado's water availability and water use continues to grow, said Waskom.

Decades of challenges

While Brouwer believes he can see the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel for Glade, there are myriad obstacles that stand between the project and completion. In addition to years of environmental studies and public comment, Wockner has vowed to prevent the construction of Glade at any cost by invoking the public right to challenge Army Corps decisions in court.

All these things have kept Glade and NISP wrapped up in years of controversy, to the point that proponents of the project have joked they will never see it completed in their lifetime.

But Colorado might not have a lifetime to wait for more water, according to draft versions of the Colorado Water Plan completed this summer.

The state is on track to be short 500,000 acre-feet of water by 2050 — enough to cover half a million football fields in one foot of water. The Fort Collins-Loveland Water Conservation District has already passed its water shortage date: By 2005, the district was short 1,100 acre-feet of water, an amount that could grow to 7,500 acre-feet by 2050, according to the Army Corps of Engineers.

The NISP project is projected to bring an extra 40,000 acre feet of water to Northern Colorado, to satisfy shortages in cities from Fort Collins to Fort Morgan.

The Northern Integrated Supply Project, of which Glade is a part, is just one of a few solutions offered by the in drafts of the state water plan for the South Platte River Basin, the most populous in the state. While Northern Water can't begin work until the Army Corps finishes the supplemental study the project remains in limbo.

"We have our good days and our bad days, in terms of 'is this ever going to end,' " said Werner.

The supplemental environmental study will not be an end to the NISP process, but instead just another step in many years' worth of approvals and studies, not to mention potential court challenges from groups such as Wockner's. Thanks to a 1980s purchase, Northern Water owns roughly 75 percent of the land needed to build Glade, but the district has yet to acquire land from Colorado State University, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, said Werner.

The cost of that land acquisition is unknown, Werner said. But the entire project has been given an estimated price tag of \$490 million.

Glade Reservoir would begin just north of Ted's Place, a Country Store gas station at the junction of U.S. Highway 14 and Highway 287. The reservoir, larger than Horsetooth, would fill 7 miles of highway with Poudre River water, and swallow land north of Ted's Place and south of Owl Canyon. Only a handful of private property owners will be displaced Werner thinks, but the new reservoir would likely transform a few adjacent properties into lakeside real estate.

Wockner thinks the reservoir would "destroy" the Poudre and must be prevented at any cost. Waskom, on the other hand, believes the destruction of the river can be avoided if a project is well-planned. While beloved for its beauty, the Poudre is far from an unadulterated river — it has been diverted and channeled since 1874, and "it is a canal in a sense," Waskom added.

Meanwhile, the inevitability of greater water shortages looms. An executive order from Gov. John Hickenlooper required that the state start preparing a state water plan to reconcile water conflicts between the Western Slope and the Front Range, as well as plan for the next several decades. But that plan, the first draft of which is due to the governor by Dec. 10, will also be subject to a year of public comment.

In Fort Collins, which has been experiencing water shortages for almost 10 years, the gap between water needs and availability will grow steadily every year unless something is done.

"The gap only grows if the projects don't get built," said Waskom.

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