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Fort Collins, Colorado

Thursday, November 11, 2010 | 32°F

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Poudre River's water quality is dropping

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The Rocky Mountain Collegian

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last edited: 11:27 pm 10/25/2010

Our Poudre River is not as pure and clean as most people think. In fact, the entire stretch from Halligan Reservoir on the North Fork through the city of Fort Collins and onto Greeley is considered "impaired" by Colorado's Water Quality Control Division.

The division is legally mandated to track water quality problems in Colorado and records any problems on what is known as the 303(d) list. This list has recently lengthened for many rivers in Colorado, including the Poudre. On the April 2010 list, the state says the water in the Poudre River is impaired due to:

Heavy metals such as cadmium and lead at levels high enough to harm aquatic life in the North Fork of the Poudre, Potentially toxic levels of the heavy metal selenium from Shields Street in Fort Collins all the way to Greeley, Concentrations of the bacteria E. coli high enough to sicken people from Interstate 25 to Greeley, and Elevated water temperatures that adversely affect aquatic life from the mouth of Poudre Canyon down to Shields Street in Fort Collins. Where do these pollutants come from and why are they showing up in the Poudre River? Some of the pollutants are natural and some are due to increasing urbanization. But most importantly, they all have become problems in part because the river's flow has decreased over the years due to diversions for municipal, industrial and agricultural purposes.

First, the metals cadmium, lead and selenium are naturally present in soil, but they become a problem when the soils are plowed or bulldozed and stream banks are disturbed or when stormwater washes dirt with the metals into the river. As the river's flow has decreased over the years, concentrations of these heavy metals in the water have reached toxic levels.

Second, E. coli and other bacteria likely come from animal wastes from feedlots that are washed into the river during rain events or insufficiently treated human sewage. Low river flows once again exacerbate these pollutants.

Third, elevated water temperatures are also due to low river flows attributable to multiple irrigation and municipal diversions. River flows are too low during the hot part of the year to guarantee the cool temperatures that aquatic life requires to survive and thrive.

Would the proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project/Glade Reservoir take more water out of the river and would this likely worsen the water quality problems in the river? You can bet on it.

If we continue to take more water out of our river, today's pollution problems will persist or worsen and other pollutants will emerge to become new problems. And, of course, pollution problems mean that we will pay, both through our pocketbooks and through our quality of life.

What can you do about the Poudre's water quality? Pay attention. Google "Colorado 303(d) list" and "Colorado Water Quality Control Commission" to locate online resources and ongoing decisions about our water.

And, of course, enthusiastically support efforts to fully protect and restore flows in the Cache la Poudre River.

Lori Brunswig and John Bartholow are a volunteer and a board member, respectfully, of Save The Poudre Coalition: Poudre Waterkeeper. They reside in Fort Collins. Letters and feedback can be sent to letters@collegian.com.

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