Waterways to make dirty list
Portion of Poudre, other sites fail to meet standards

BY TREVOR HUGHES
TrevorHughes@coloradoan.com

State water quality regulators next week will likely add portions of the Poudre and Big Thompson rivers, as well as Carter, Loveland and Boyd lakes, to a list of water bodies failing to meet clean water standards, largely because of mercury pollution from power plants.

The decision sets the stage for either deciding how to improve and clean up the water bodies or changing the standards. If regulators eventually decide the waters need to be cleaned up, millions of dollars might have to be spent upgrading water-treatment plants.

However, just developing regulations specifying how clean a water body needs to be can take up to 13 years.

"It's identifying those water bodies where water quality improvement is needed," said Paul Frohardt, administrator of the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission. "We don't know the answer to the question. We're just identifying the problem."

Carter, Boyd, Loveland and Horseshoe lakes are all expected to be added to the water quality commission's so-called 303(d) list because federal officials have warned that people should not eat fish caught there because of high levels of mercury.

Horsetooth Reservoir, already on the list for lacking oxygen in some areas, is being added again because of mercury concerns. The reservoir draws hundreds of thousands of visitors annually.

Brian Werner, a spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which manages the water in Horsetooth, said low levels of oxygen can be bad for fish. But he said the readings have found a lack of oxygen in one layer of water within the reservoir, and "the fish just move elsewhere."

Werner said Northern Water is working with state regulators and the Division of Wildlife to address the oxygen concerns. Northern supplies water to farms and municipalities, including Fort Collins, along the Front Range.

Cleaning up water bodies polluted with mercury is much harder because the mercury is coming from power plants, generally ones powered by burning coal.

"It's not like you can go in and do something with Horsetooth that will solve that problem," Frohardt said.

A portion of the Poudre River, from the Monroe Canal to Shields Street, is being added because of concerns about pH levels and elevated levels of copper. Copper is toxic to aquatic life, Frohardt said.

Werner said the elevated levels of copper in that section of the Poudre were likely the result of Northern's efforts to control algae in its canal connecting Horsetooth Reservoir to the river. Northern Water this year began phasing out copper sulfate, which kills algae, and is now using hydrogen peroxide, Werner said.

Too much algae in a waterbody can significantly decrease the amount of dissolved oxygen in the water, making it harder for fish to live.

Werner said Northern stopped using copper sulfate because it recognized it was contributing to the problem in the Poudre. Copper sulfate has long been used as an algae control agent by the water district, he said.

"We pay more attention to water quality now more than ever," Werner said.

Another portion of the Poudre, from Box Elder Creek east to the South Platte River, is already on the list because of elevated levels of selenium, common in agricultural runoff.

"A lot of times these are long-term challenges," Frohardt said. "It doesn't mean that nobody is going to do anything for 13 years. The high-priority water bodies are addressed much more quickly than that."

If the commission adds the local waters to the list, water quality regulators with the state will develop "total maximum daily load" standards for each body, setting out levels of permissible pollutants.

Regulators will then begin developing plans to limit the pollutants, clean up the water or change the standards.

"Sometimes you decide that the standard probably should be different," Frohardt said.

The commission, which makes its decision Monday in Denver, oversees 107,000 stream miles in Colorado.