



Report details future water needs

SWSI says statewide consumption will double during next 40 years

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DENVER - At least 1.8 million people are expected to live in northeast Colorado by 2050, straining drinking water supplies, drying up farmland across the region and forcing authorities to consider building new water storage and pipeline projects, according to a state water supply report issued this week.

The 2010 Statewide Water Supply Initiative, or SWSI, report concludes that statewide water consumption will double during the next 40 years and require between 600,000 and 1 million acre-feet of additional water supplies to sate the state's growing thirst.

Doing that will mean up to 267,000 acres of today's irrigated land in northeast Colorado - the entire South Platte River Basin including most of Larimer County but excluding the Denver metro area - will be forced to go dry as water used for crops will be used for city drinking water.

Without studying the impact of climate change on water availability in Colorado, the report shows that Northern Colorado will be short more than 100,000 acre-feet of water to meet the demand even if Glade Reservoir and all other water storage projects now on the table are eventually built.

"SWSI describes the near-term water budget shortfall certainly as striking as the \$1.2 billion budget shortfall with the state," Gov. John Hickenlooper said Friday, speaking at the Colorado Water Congress annual meeting in Denver. "We have to be very careful to resist balancing our water budget on the backs of agricultural uses."

How that water budget would be balanced without taking much of a toll on both the environment and farming remains uncertain.

The SWSI report calls for new water projects to be developed, including a 442-mile water pipeline to the Front Range from Flaming Gorge Reservoir similar to Fort Collins entrepreneur Aaron Million's

proposed Regional Watershed Supply Project.

Million's project would include a 500-mile water pipeline stretching from western Wyoming to Fort Collins and other Front Range cities.

"Without a project like ours coming on line, (it would mean) continued pressure on the Poudre, continued dry-up of ag - a huge impact on communities," Million said, adding that he thinks his project, which would siphon water from the Green River, could shore up roughly half of the region's long-term water shortfall.

Approval for that project is at least seven years away.

The SWSI report shows that all of Northern Colorado's water projects, including the proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project, the Halligan and Seaman reservoir expansions, and the Windy Gap Firing Project are required to meet the region's water needs, said Brian Werner, spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District.

"If you look at it, it's a little scary," he said. "What are the chances everything that's out there is going to get permitted and built?"

Permitting decisions for NISP and Glade Reservoir likely are 10 to 12 years away, he said.

Environmentalists say drying up some agricultural land is necessary, and the state's call for new water projects doesn't adequately demand water conservation as a way of reducing the future water

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shortfall.

Drew Beckwith, water policy manager for Western Resource Advocates in Boulder, said the answer to the state's water shortfall is for the state to encourage farmers to voluntarily dry up their land, cities to implement water conservation measures and find ways to reuse municipal water.

"Municipal water conservation should be the first strategy that all providers pursue across the state," he said.

Other strategies should be considered that the SWSI report doesn't approach, he said, including allowing farmers to occasionally fallow their land.

Gary Wockner, director of Save the Poudre in Fort Collins, said the group still is analyzing the report, but believes the SWSI report should have focused on river protection.

"The report identifies that there are environmental needs, but it does not yet identify how to address those needs or fill the gap for creating healthy rivers in Colorado," he said.

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