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Reservoir drain muddies Poudre

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A mechanical problem at Milton Seaman Reservoir is behind the recent surge of mud and silt in the Poudre River, officials say.

The reservoir along the North Fork of the Poudre is owned and operated by the city of Greeley. Seaman was drained to allow repairs to hydraulic systems on two of the facility's five gates, said Randy Gustafson, manager of the reservoir.

With the North Fork running high, silt from the bottom of the reservoir was expected to go into the river but dissipate without causing significant damage, Gustafson said.

"We really try to not mess up the river," he said. "It looked bad on the North Fork; but with the high flows, the silt won't set up on the bottom of the stream."

But once the reservoir was down, crews found they could not reach the gates because of the amount of tree limbs and other debris packed against enclosures that shield the gates, Gustafson said. Equipment capable of removing the material is not stationed at the reservoir.

A contractor will have to be found to remove the debris, Gustafson said. Repairs to the gates might have to wait a number of years until flow conditions are right again.

Gates on the reservoir will be closed and the reservoir allowed to refill, he said.

On Monday, sediment from the reservoir muddied the stream all the way past its confluence with the main stem of the river, said Bill Sears, a Poudre Canyon resident.

"It looked like a volcanic mudslide," he said. "It was pretty goopy."

The turbidity of the water was reminiscent of a 1996 release from Halligan Reservoir, which is also along the North Fork, resulting in a major kill-off of fish in the stream, Sears said.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife was notified about the Seaman release and expected little impact to fish, said spokeswoman Jennifer Churchill. Fish would likely swim upstream to avoid the silt.

Fort Collins' water supply was not affected by the influx of mud into the river, said Kevin Gertig, interim water resources and treatment manager. The city's intake from the river is upstream of the North Fork's confluence with the main stem.