

Statewide plan preps for more people, less water

Ryan Maye Handy, The Coloradoan 6:49 p.m. MDT September 17, 2014



(Photo: Coloradoan library)

Colorado is on track to run short of water for the Front Range's expanding population by 2050, a grim reality the state is trying to prepare for with the Colorado Water Plan.

State regulators tasked with collecting public input on the plan, which is expected to arrive on Gov. John Hickenlooper's desk in December, visited Fort Collins on Wednesday, Sept. 17. Turnout at the Fort Collins Senior Center was better than any of the group's previous seven meetings held across the state — perhaps because the South Platte River Basin that includes the Cache la Poudre River is considered to be the most crucial part of the plan.

The South Platte River Basin takes up the entire northeast corner of the state. It encompasses all cities from Denver to Fort Collins and east, and includes 25 percent of all the irrigated agricultural land in the state. It is also the spot where Colorado's population is expected to grow the most in the next several decades.

"We know that the South Platte is a major contributor to the overall quality of life and the state of the economy," said Sean Cronin, chairman of the South Platte Basin Roundtable, a group of water experts who meet to discuss issues in the basin.

Ultimately, the problem of future Front Range water supply comes down to a simple concept: All the water is "over there," on Colorado's Western Slope.

"We have a small problem in Colorado," said one man who addressed the regulators Wednesday. "All the people live on this side of the mountains, and all the water's on the other damn side of the mountains."

The draft water plan, completed in July, offers several solutions to the Front Range's predicament. They include buying more water rights from agricultural land users — long a popular solution to bolstering water resources — and building extra water storage, such as the planned Glade Reservoir north of Fort Collins.

Nearly 30 residents, of the nearly 100 people at Tuesday's meeting, offered solutions of their own. Some supported Glade, part of the highly controversial Northern Integrated Supply Project that has been wrapped up in environmental studies for years. Others, like Gary Wockner, were vehemently against any artificial projects aimed at water storage.

Wockner, director of the local nonprofit Save the Poudre, wants to "make sure the plan does not endorse any water supply projects." A few in the audience asked that preparation for a drier future not include new reservoirs, but instead measures to control the state's population growth.

All public comment on the statewide plan, which has been divided into chapters for Colorado's eight river basins, is due by Oct. 10. By Nov. 1, the water conservation board must present a report on public opinion, just a month before the final plan is due on the governor's desk.

The board hopes to start implementing the plan by April 2015.

Comment on the Colorado Water Plan

- Read drafts of the basin water plans at <http://www.coloradowaterplan.com> (<http://www.coloradowaterplan.com/>)
- Send comments on the state water plan by emailing cowaterplan@state.co.us (<mailto:cowaterplan@state.co.us>)

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