

Tug-of-war over new water project that would serve 2 Boulder County towns drags on

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Boulder County municipalities have been playing tug-of-war with environmental advocates for the last four years over a proposed water project on the Cache la Poudre and South Platte rivers. Two upcoming reports may help determine the fate of the project.

The Northern Integrated Supply Project, if approved, would store and distribute 40,000 acre-feet of water to 15 fast-growing water districts and communities along the northern Front Range, including three in Boulder County -- the towns of Erie and Lafayette, and the Left Hand Water District.

"The NISP project really fits like a glove on our water portfolio for the future," said Doug Short, the public works director in Lafayette.

The city is trying to diversify its water supply to prevent vulnerability from dependence on a single source, especially considering the unknown future impacts of climate change, Short said.

The proposed supply project would include two reservoirs, two pump plants and a series of pipelines aimed at providing water for the growing population east of the Rockies.

"One way or another we're going to need additional water," said Brian Werner, of Northern Water, the organization proposing the project.

Northern Water currently diverts and stores water from both sides of the Rocky Mountains, most notably through the Colorado-Big Thompson project. They estimate that one acre-foot of water is enough to satisfy the annual needs of two urban families.

Most of the annual water supply in Colorado falls in the form of snow. This year's snowpack in the South Platte watershed, on the eastern slope, is only 50 percent of what it usually is, Werner said. This is a sharp contrast from last year, when Northern Water had record inflows and actually ran out of places to put all the water.

The proposed project would increase Northern Water's storage capacity so it could collect more water in wet years, like last year, to be used in dry years, like this year.

"We're there for those dry times," Werner said, equating Northern Water to a water supply savings account.

The proposed Glade Reservoir would store water from the Cache la Poudre River. Its location northwest of Fort Collins would require the relocation of seven miles of U.S. 287. The second proposed water storage facility, Galeton Reservoir, would be located northeast of Greeley and would collect water diverted from the South Platte River.

So far the participating communities have invested \$10 million to pay for the project's permitting and preliminary studies. The total estimated cost for the project has been pegged at \$490 million. Lafayette's public works director said the investment will be well worth it.

"Fifty years from now, to build a reservoir is going to be ten times the cost," Short said.

In addition to the economic costs, opponents fear environmental degradation related to the project. Laura Belanger, a water resources and environmental engineer at Boulder-based Western Resource Advocates, said diverting water from the rivers will be detrimental to the riparian ecosystems.

"There will be no peak flows left in the Poudre River," Belanger said.

Peak flows provide habitat and spawning areas for wildlife, she said, as well as move sediment and remove vegetation.

"If you remove peak flows from a stream system, that stream system can't survive," Belanger said.

The project's initial draft environmental impact statement was released in April 2008. Based on critical feedback on the report, the Army Corps of Engineers undertook a supplemental draft, which should be released sometime this year. Western Resource Advocates, too, plans to release an updated version of their proposed alternatives in the near future.

"What it comes down to is, it's just really not needed," Belanger said.

Belanger said the draft environmental impact statement reflects water needs that are no longer as significant. For example, she said the population estimates for the northern Front Range are too high because they were conducted before the economic downturn. She also said the demands are inflated to justify the need for the project.

"They're not only not showing any conservation gains, they're actually showing that per capita demands increase," Belanger said.

Werner said Northern Water's supply project would be better than the alternative of "buy and dry," where municipalities would purchase water rights from farmers and push agriculture out of the region. But according to estimates by Western Resource Advocates, the cities should have enough water for most years if they conserve, reuse, and buy the water rights from farms that will be displaced by suburban expansion. In years of drought, they can ask farmers to voluntarily sell their water rights to the city.

Lafayette, like many communities along the Front Range, has implemented a number of conservation efforts to keep future water consumption in check. The city has water audits and a price structure that increases rates as more water is used, Short said. A slow-growth ordinance also limits new construction in Lafayette to 200 houses per year.

Belanger commended Northern Water and the project's participating communities for their conservation efforts and outreach, and she said that these savings should be considered a larger portion of future water supplies. But Northern Water is unconvinced that it will be enough. Limiting water projects will not limit growth, Werner said.

"We can't conserve our way to future supply," he said.