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Answer to state's water dilemma lies near compromise

Colorado's Front Range is thirsty, and it's only going to get thirstier.

Between 2000 and 2010, Larimer County grew by 40,000 people. By 2020, another 60,000 residents are expected to make their homes here, according to the Colorado Department of Local Affairs.

And most will want a yard. Some will want to raft down the river, while others will tend crops or mine natural resources. Most all will assuredly bathe.

Our water needs are increasing at an exponential pace, and a feasible solution to this problem still hasn't materialized.

Last year's wet winter left our reserves brimming with water, and that's left us feeling safe. We've saved for a rainy day — or, in this case, a dry one. After this year's alarmingly light snowpack, though, we're going to see our storage solutions taxed. When the hot summer leaves our reservoirs low, folks will be crying out for a solution.

The problem is that you have two sides, and each largely refuses to meet in the middle.

The option that's been with us for years is NISP, the Northern Integrated Supply Project. This plan creates Glade Reservoir, which siphons Poudre River water into a h olding pen larger than Horsetooth Reservoir. NISP significantly alters the landscape of Northern Colorado from an environmental, native habitat and recreational standpoint. We're not convinced there's not a better way.

Aaron Million and his pipeline presents one alternative. The project would draw water from the Green River and Flaming Gorge in southwestern Wyoming and siphon it back to its originating state of Colorado. Million gets points for innovation by attempting to couple it with a hydroelectric power project, and we applaud him for the resulting effort that leaves the Poudre free and clear. However, the project comes with its own environmental risks, and we have significant doubts as to the feasibility of the inexorably long pipeline and are unsure that it will become a reality. Cost is anywhere from $3 billion to $9 billion, depending on whose studies you believe, and it still faces an uphill challenge, including miles of approvals and impact

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studies.

On the other side of the coin are environmentalists. They generally believe that both of these solutions are 19th and 20th century answers to a 21st century quandary. Groups such as Save the Poudre have taken the admirable stance that our water needs can be met largely through conservation tactics. A nice idea, but even tiered, progressive water rates and gray-water systems only become effective with complete agricultural, residential and industrial buy in. In short, we believe that counting on conservation alone to meet the needs of our booming population is about as feasible as Million's pipeline.

None of the solutions can be attained without sacrifice. Call us naive, but we'd like to have our cake and eat it, too. We'd like to see environmental groups partner with agricultural and mining interests to see if there's not a plan that can't reach middle ground.

No water solution should be undertaken without conservation at its core. In this, groups such as Western Resource Advocates are correct. We need to fund programs that reward less consumption and educate Northern Coloradans about methods they can try to reduce their water use. We need to implement gra- water systems aggressively and improve irrigation systems. This requires investment on all of our part. As our supplies become increasingly finite, that's going to be a cost of living here.

But conservation isn't enough.

We need to look at storage or siphoning beyond small gravel pits that groups such as Save the Poudre suggest. Eighty percent of the state's water falls on the Western Slope, and we're letting a lot of it go to other states without a comprehensive plan in place. We're not hydrologists, but we have to believe there's a more modern way of solving the problem that doesn't involve decimating the Poudre or a more than-500-mile pipeline to a far off corner of Wyoming.

Most importantly, we need to be talking about this now. It's an easy issue to ignore when the reservoirs are full, but we need to make decisions while we have the security of savings, and not when our natural water towers are dry and we're backed into a corner.

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