

Glade Reservoir plan sets battle for Poudre River's future

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Both sides of a debate over the controversial Glade Reservoir expect a key federal agency to support the plan in a long-awaited document that should spark the next round in the fight over the Poudre River.

But that support by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is bound to carry conditions — steps mitigating the environmental consequences of tapping into the last available flows of the Poudre River — that could spark a long battle over the river's future and the fate of the \$405 million proposal that includes the reservoir.

Opponents have a team of scientists and lawyers gearing up to review the Corps' draft environmental impact statement, which is expected to be released April 30, and bombard the Corps with comments on the project, potentially delaying a record of decision and a permit to build the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP.

Much of the debate has centered on how much the project will drain the Poudre. Opponents say it will make "every year a dry year" on the river; the project's manager says it could actually add water to the river during otherwise dry times.

The Poudre has been tapped for drinking and agricultural water for more than 140 years, said Brian Werner, a spokesman for Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which proposed NISP. And the river will continue to be used, either through the rights tied to Glade or by some other claim to the water, he said.

Critics of the project are not strictly opposed to growth or dams, said Gary Wockner, a Fort Collins ecologist and spokesman for anti-NISP group the Save the Poudre Coalition.

But they are drawing the line on taking any more water out of the Poudre.

River drain

NISP would rely on the Poudre River and Glade Reservoir — which would be slightly bigger than Horsetooth Reservoir — as well as the South Platte River and Galeton Reservoir on the plains, to supply 15 communities and water districts with new water moved around by more than 30 miles of pipeline.

The Fort Collins-Loveland Water District, which covers portions of south Fort Collins, is one of the participating entities. The city is of Fort Collins is not. Water rights for Glade are limited to times of high flow, primarily the spring runoff, and could be drawn upon four out of 10 years based on recent average flows on the river, Werner said. Filling Glade is likely to take five to 10 years.

Galeton Reservoir would be about one-quarter the size of Glade. Part of Galeton's water would be pumped west to irrigation ditches coming off the Poudre in exchange for water diverted into Glade.

Because water exchanged with the irrigation companies could be drawn for Glade every year, the timeline to fill the reservoir could easily accelerate with a series of average or wet years.

A city of Fort Collins analysis of the project last fall suggests that during an average year, peak flows through town would be reduced 30 percent to 40 percent. In wet years with substantial runoff, the reduction could be higher. During dry periods, flows through town would not be affected.

'Key' Fort Collins feature

Fort Collins city officials have not been privy to many details of the project, including its operational plan, said John Stokes, director of the city's Natural Resource Department.

They are prepared to analyze the draft EIS upon its release and to delve into details such as the project's potential impact to city-owned natural areas and Northern Water's proposals for mitigation.

What happens to the river matters to Fort Collins residents, Stokes said.

The Poudre is "the key natural feature in our landscape," he said, in terms of recreation, natural areas and redevelopment in areas where it traverses the city, particularly downtown.

City planning documents and the recent UniverCity Connections program — a communitywide effort aimed at envisioning ways to build stronger physical and cultural ties between Colorado State University and downtown — clearly show the importance of the river to the community, he said.

"I believe the Poudre River is pretty central to the community's conception of itself," he said. "The community really identifies with that river corridor."

A special river zoning district has been crafted to make way for redevelopment projects, including amphitheaters and the construction of a new facility for the Science Discovery Center and the Fort Collins Museum.

How any of those efforts would be affected by lower flows on the river during its peak season is hard to assess, Stokes said.

The Poudre and its health are important issues for nearby property owners, said Matt Evans, a real estate agent involved with downtown and North College development projects.

Evans was co-chairman of a UniverCity Connections task force that focused on ways to enhance, develop and protect the river.

"Our goal is to maintain and enhance in-stream flows," he said. "We want to have a healthy and attractive river corridor."

The Poudre will always be a "seasonal" river, he said, with fluctuating levels. But keeping a consistent minimal flow is critical to safeguarding its health.



Noticeable changes?

Reducing the river's flow would likely have some affect on the landscape along the river, said Reagan Waskom, director of the Colorado Water Resources Research Institute at CSU. The changes could be subtle.

"I think the average Fort Collins resident riding a bike along the Poudre trail is not going to notice much of a difference," he said.

The long-running practice of tapping into the Poudre has to end to preserve its health, Wockner said.

"It is a working river, and this project will finally work it to death," he said.

But it's also possible that the project could bolster Poudre River flows during times of the year when the river typically slows to a trickle, NISP project manager Carl Brouwer said.

Better flows would boost efforts by state wildlife officials to improve fishing through Fort Collins, he said.

Releases of water from the reservoir back to the river could be negotiated as part of the mitigation required for the project, he said. But it's not clear what the vision is for the river through Fort Collins.

"We are certainly interested in working with folks," Brouwer said. "So far all we're hearing from the other side is all or nothing."

See Sunday's Coloradoan for a special report on Glade Reservoir and the Northern Integrated Supply Project, including video and a photo gallery.