

# NISP opponent makes case to FM council

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Fort Morgan Times

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A representative of a group trying to stop a large water project in which Fort Morgan plans to participate made a presentation to the Fort Morgan City Council on Tuesday.

The Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP) is a plan to construct two reservoirs near Fort Collins, capture water from the Cache la Poudre River and supply the water to the 15 municipalities and water districts involved in the project. The project is still in the permitting process with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a process that has been delayed several times.

Gary Wockner of the Save the Poudre Coalition said it is the goal of his group to stop the project. Wockner said Save the Poudre comprises 16 environmental groups and represents 3 million U.S. citizens.

He thanked the council for inviting him to speak at Tuesday's meeting.

"We've been doing this for several years, and Fort Morgan is the first NISP participant to ask us to do this," he said.

The anti-NISP group also hopes to offer better alternatives for the cities and towns that need water and to propose a river restoration plan for the future, Wockner said.

The NISP project would dry up some 100,000 acres of irrigated farmland in northern Colorado, Wockner said. About 65,000 of those acres would be dried up permanently, and the other 35,000 during the initial diversion of water to fill the NISP reservoirs, he said.

Wockner showed slides of the Poudre River in downtown Fort Collins with virtually no water in it — the photos showed what appeared to be a rock-filled riverbed. He said the NISP project proposes to capture "excess flows" from the Poudre, but that such flows are nonexistent.

Officials of the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, however, said during a public forum in Fort Morgan several months ago that if NISP had been in place during the unusually wet year of 2009, it would have captured nearly 56,000 acre-feet of water.

The NCWCD officials also said the "drying up" of agricultural land would accelerate if NISP is not built. Northern Water is spearheading the NISP project, and also developed the Colorado-Big Thompson water project that is Fort Morgan's current primary supplier of water.

The cost of participation in NISP would create an enormous financial burden and "massive public debt for struggling small towns" that have signed up to finance the project, Wockner claimed.

Fort Morgan's participation is expected to cost the city approximately \$40 million in payments over about 15 years, according to the most recent figures cited by city officials. Exactly how much it would actually cost the city to finance its contribution is unclear.

Wockner also cited projections that showed Fort Morgan experiencing "negative growth" in recent years, so the new water customers needed to help pay for the city's participation in NISP simply would not be there.

The Morgan County Quality Water District is also a participant in NISP.

Wockner said Save the Poudre believes new growth in the area can be supplied with water by using the ground water beneath the newly developed land, and requiring developers to turn over "growth displaced" water to cities.

The group also advocates water conservation and the use of wells with augmentation where possible, he said.

Gary Dreessen, the city's water resources director and a strong proponent of NISP, asked some pointed questions of Wockner after his presentation.

"All this water that you want to go down the Poudre — where do you want it to go?" Dreessen asked.

Wockner said Save the Poudre believes there aren't any high flows in the river.

City Manager Pat Merrill said the growth statistics Wockner cited were merely projections, and "you never know for sure until you get to the census." He noted that school populations in the area are rising.

Merrill recalled a rural area where he previously worked that also showed negative growth projections over a number of years, but when the census was done the actual growth was 10 percent.

Merrill also noted that Wockner's figure on the drying of agricultural land may include some farms that are no longer operating.

"Some of those farms have already been dried up," he said. "The water's already gone."

Wockner said Save the Poudre will do anything it can to stop NISP, including legal action, but that a long process lies ahead before the project could become a reality. He said the Corps of Engineers permitting process could drag on for another two years, and then the EPA will have to sign off on the project and participants will have to figure out how to pay for it.

"Anyone can object at any stage," he said. "It could go five to 20 years."

Northern Water officials have said they expect a permit to be issued for NISP sometime in 2010, with construction expected to begin the following year.

— *Contact John Brennan at [editor@fmtimes.com](mailto:editor@fmtimes.com).*

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For the record, Dr. Wockner absolutely did not say: "Wockner said Save the Poudre will do anything it can to stop NISP, including legal action,..."

He was asked pointedly by the Mayor if Save The Poudre would sue, and he responded that "Our goal is to stop the project."