

Politicians, residents, producers come together to push NISP

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FORT LUPTON — Northern Coloradans from many walks of life united Tuesday to stress that without more water storage they'll spend future years taking away the vital resource from one another, watching too much of it leave the state and suffering negative economic consequences as a result.

About 200 city officials, local and state politicians, farmers, ranchers and concerned residents attended a rally for the Northern Integrated Supply Project — or NISP, as it's more commonly called.

The event, which took place at the Fort Lupton Historical Site, concluded with attendees chanting "NISP now! NISP now!" — emphasizing that the water-storage project, which has been in the planning stages for 13 years, is needed as soon as possible, with the region already running into tight supplies during current drought conditions.

"I appreciate being invited to these NISP rallies ... but I'm ready to be invited to a NISP ribbon-cutting," said Sen. Mary Hodge, D-Brighton, one of many statements made by local representatives and officials that received a round of applause.

Throughout the rally, speakers — which included former U.S. Sen. Hank Brown, former Colorado Agriculture Secretary Don Ament, Rep. Jerry Sonnenberg, R-Sterling, and Board of Weld County Commissioners chairman Sean Conway — said northern Colorado has grown and thrived thanks to water projects built decades ago by the forefathers of the region.

"It's our turn now," said Fort Lupton Mayor Tommy Holton. "This is not a Democratic or a Republican issue — this is a Colorado issue."

The speakers also reiterated how important it is that everyone understand the need for more water storage, and that continuing to spread the NISP message is vital.

NISP if approved, would provide 40,000 acre feet water to 15 municipalities and water districts in northern Colorado — one acre foot of water serves about 2 1/2 families of four for one year.

NISP would include the construction of the Glade Reservoir, located northwest of Fort Collins, which would be slightly larger than nearby Horsetooth Reservoir, and the Galeton Reservoir northeast of Greeley, which would be about one-quarter the size of Glade.

The project — which is the largest engineering endeavor proposed along Colorado's Front Range in a quarter century — is still in the permitting process, awaiting final approval from the federal government.

If approved, NISP is expected to cost nearly \$500 million to construct and could take eight years to complete.

The project has been spearheaded by Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District in Berthoud, which provides water to northeastern Colorado with its Colorado-Big Thompson and Windy Gap projects.

Supporters of the project said Tuesday that without the additional storage, rapidly growing cities along the Front Range will be forced to buy water from agriculture producers. As many as 60,000 acres of irrigated farmland could be dried up without NISP, speakers said. In addition to hurting food production and the local economy, eliminating that many irrigated crops would increase temperatures and carbon dioxide levels in the region, Brown explained.

The 2010 Statewide Water Supply Initiative study estimates that, in the South Platte Basin as a whole, the demand gap will be between 36,000 and 170,000 acre feet by 2050 — when the population of the northern Front Range is expected to be double what it is now.

Speakers expressed frustration that, during the past three years, Colorado has sent too much water in South Platte River down to Nebraska — about 1.4 million acre feet more than the neighboring state requires.

“We need a way to keep that water in Colorado and make use of it,” Sonnenberg said. “Storing it is the only way we can do that.”

The project has received support from about every agriculture organization in the state, and also from a number of local economic groups and the chambers of commerce in Greeley, Evans and Windsor, among others chambers.

Opponents of NISP — most notably the Save the Poudre Coalition — say the project would reduce stream flows in the Poudre River and harm the ecology of the river. The group pushes conservation as a way of meeting future water needs.

However, Brown stressed during his speech that building the two NISP reservoirs and storing more water locally would actually help improve streamflows.

About NISP

The Northern Integrated Supply Project is a water storage effort supporters say will ensure northern Colorado communities have enough water for the future. Among the 15 water providers that would receive additional water from NISP are: Windsor, Eaton, Evans, Severance and the Central Weld County Water District.