

Poudre River listed among nation's most threatened

Chris Casey, (Bio) ccasey@greeleytrib.com

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A lesser yellowlegs fishes in the Poudre River in the reflection of a petroleum storage tank near Rover Run Dog Park. American Rivers, an organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of North America's waterways, named the Cache la Poudre River one of America's most endangered rivers.



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FORT COLLINS -- The Cache La Poudre on Thursday was named among the nation's 10 most endangered rivers, further fueling environmentalists' opposition to a plan to build a \$400 million reservoir north of Fort Collins.

Calling it a sad day for Fort Collins and a scar on the state, members of the Save the Poudre Coalition held a press conference along the Poudre River near downtown.

Gary Wockner, the group's spokesman, said the Poudre got the endangered listing because of the threat posed by the Glade Reservoir storage project, which would be slightly larger than Horsetooth Reservoir west of Fort Collins.

"It will further drain this river, it will severely degrade the investment this community has made in the river corridor, it will threaten Fort Collins' downtown economy, it will bathe northern Colorado communities in debt, it will dry up farms, and it won't solve our long-term water supply challenges," Wockner said. "Draining the Poudre is not the answer."

But a representative with the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which has proposed the project, said no water would be diverted unless minimum streamflows are being met. Brian Werner said the reservoir is vital to the water-storage needs of 11 northern Colorado towns and cities and four water districts.

The region has doubled its population during the past 30 years, Werner said, and the 15 partners' water needs are expected to increase almost three-fold by 2050.

"We haven't built a new storage facility in 30 years," he said. "Sooner or later you've got to build some infrastructure, and we're proposing that this makes the most sense -- economic and environmental sense -- for what those communities desperately need."

American Rivers, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that promotes river conservation, released the endangered river list. Its report points out that the Poudre River is Colorado's only Wild and Scenic river, calling it the "lifeblood" of the cities and farms it serves.

ENDANGERED RIVER

American Rivers, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, annually lists rivers considered most endangered based on three criteria:

- * The magnitude of a threat to the river;
- * A major decision point in the coming year;
- * The regional and national significance of the river.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which will ultimately grant or deny a

permit for the project, which could start being constructed in 2011, is expected to release an environmental impact statement on the Northern Integrated Supply Project/Glade Reservoir, by the end of April. A 90-day public comment period will follow the release of the document, expected to be hundreds of pages long.

For more information on the NISP/Glade project, go to www.savethepoudre.org and www.ncwcd.org and click "projects."

For more information on the American Rivers Endangered Rivers list, go to www.americanrivers.org.

Wockner said about 60 percent of the Poudre's water is diverted before the river reaches Fort Collins. He said the Glade Reservoir would divert 30 percent more of what's left, "so it's a massive diversion proposal."

At Thursday's announcement, Save the Poudre Coalition members stood ankle-deep in the river, holding signs that alternated between "Save the Poudre" and "Damn the Glade."

"What's happening on the Poudre here today is ground zero for the next phase of the West's water wars," Wockner said.

Susan LeFever, director of the Sierra Club's Rocky Mountain chapter, and Lisa Poppaw, a Fort Collins city councilwoman, also spoke. LeFever said the Northern Integrated Supply Project/Glade Reservoir will dry up farms and cover them with pavement and subdivisions.

"Glade Reservoir is a short-term Band-Aid approach that will drain the river first and allow sensible water policies to be put off for another 15 years," she said. "If this project goes forward, it will set the stage for more Colorado rivers to become endangered in the future."

Poppaw said Fort Collins has invested millions of dollars in building bike paths and parks along the Poudre River, and "our downtown economy is increasingly tied to and dependent on a healthy river."

Werner, however, said streamflows would be maintained.

He said the NSIP and Glade project can only divert water during the peak of the spring runoff, roughly May to early July. During that time, the project could take an average 30 percent more out of the Poudre, but "we're going to shave off only the very top portion of that (runoff)," he said. "We're not going to be diverting eight or nine months out of the year. We can't. That water rate is not there."

He said the Poudre also is classified as a national heritage waterway, meaning it's a working river. "We've been able to diversify our economy and do a number of things. Utilizing and using the river is what makes this region what it is."

Werner said the normal cycle of the Poudre is to run relatively dry during late-summer periods. He added that no water for the reservoir would be diverted above the canyon mouth, so it wouldn't harm recreational uses such as whitewater rafting.

Wockner, meanwhile, said the Glade, which will hold 170,000 acre feet of water and require the relocation of U.S. 287, would reduce the Poudre to "a whisper" by the time it reaches Fort Collins.

He said the Save the Poudre Coalition supports the right of cities -- which include Eaton, Windsor and Evans -- to get needed water, but not from the Poudre. The group believes water can be supplied through better conservation and partnerships with the agricultural community.

He said 85 percent of water pulled from the Poudre goes to agricultural uses. "The river is currently degraded and often dry and we don't want any more water taken out of it," Wockner said.

Werner, meanwhile, said the coalition's adjectives such as "draining" and "degrading" aren't accurate. He also questions the coalition's assertions that more conservation will provide future water supplies.

"Those people of those communities and districts are practicing good water conservation, and they have reduced their water consumption over 30 percent ... in the past 15 years," he said. Also, the 15 partners, which would fully fund the project through cash, bonds and loans, have studied the fiscal demand of the project and deemed it economically feasible.

He said the NCWCD worked with former Sen. Hank Brown on the original Wild And Scenic legislation in 1986, which protected the river above the canyon mouth from future development. Also, the measure protected the river from being dammed. The Glade Reservoir would be

an off-stream reservoir, which is more environmentally sensitive, Werner said.

"These people weren't even around back then," he said of the reservoir opponents. "They don't understand how far we've come on this."

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