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Region needs_to prepare for life after NISP

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Nearly four years ago, when plans for a regional water storage and distribution plan were unveiled with a new reservoir northwest of Fort Collins as its centerpiece, the Business Report weighed in with an editorial supporting the project.

Plenty has transpired since then, including the release of an exhaustive draft environmental impact statement by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the agency that must evaluate the Northern Integrated Supply Project that would be built and owned by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District.

The city of Fort Collins replied first with a report that said in part that the project, if built, would lead to increased costs for treating potable water and wastewater discharge and would degrade water quality in the Cache la Poudre River. Water in the river would be the source for Glade Reservoir - a storage vessel larger than Horsetooth Reservoir - that is the linchpin of the NISP plan.

The regional office of the Environmental Protection Agency in September sent a 54-page letter attacking the Corps of Engineers report in the strongest possible language. The letter from EPA regional administrator Carol Rushin outlined the potential for the project to violate federal and state water quality standards, damage wildlife habitat along the Poudre's course and, to a lesser degree, on the South Platte River. A second letter in October detailed how the Corps of Engineers had failed to adequately evaluate alternatives to the NISP project.

For its part, the water district issued statements after the scathing EPA analysis saying that the agency's concerns could be addressed, and district officials said they were prepared to pay \$1 million, on top of an earlier appropriation of \$5 million, for expanded studies of the project. Good money after bad, in our opinion.

The flaws that the EPA analysis found in the draft EIS are so numerous, and so intricately detailed, that we doubt they can be fixed. There can be no worse economic damage that could be done to this region than to allow environmental quality, especially the health of our rivers, to be degraded.

What Northern Colorado needs most now is a renewed effort to address the region's water-supply problems that will only worsen with the passage of time. The crux of the issue is how growing cities, with populations rising at a rate of about 1.5 percent annually, can coexist with an agricultural economy that consumes 90 percent of the region's water.

NISP is a mistake we can't afford to make. Let's begin work on alternatives.