
Poll: Support for Glade Project High in Larimer and Weld

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BERTHOUD—A sizeable majority of northern Coloradans believe Glade and Galeton reservoirs should be built, though there's a disparity on several issues between Larimer and Weld counties, a new poll shows.

A majority in both counties support the Northern Integrated Supply Project, also known as the Glade Reservoir project.

Among opponents, more Larimer residents are against it than people in Weld. Of people who support it, more Weld residents than Larimer residents believe the chief reason is the need for more water.

Water officials said Friday they were surprised by the results of the poll, conducted last month by Denver pollster Floyd Ciruli, well-known for political polling work and other public-policy polls. Ciruli presented his results to the board of the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District last week and said his study shows residents know the area needs more water storage.

Northern Water officials hope to build NISP, a \$426 million project intended to take water off the Cache la Poudre River during its peak flow season and put it into a new reservoir.

Through added storage and exchanges with farmers that will allow them to use water from the South Platte River, NISP will provide 40,000 acre-feet of guaranteed water a year. That's enough for about 80,000 homes for a year, give or take.

Advocates say adequate water is needed to prevent the drying-up of farms in Weld. Opponents, who include conservationists and environmental groups, say the harm to the Poudre will be too great.

Overall, 81 percent of Weld residents favor NISP and 8 percent oppose it. Eleven percent of people in Weld aren't sure.

In Larimer, 63 percent of people favor the project and 24 percent oppose it. About 13 percent of Larimer residents aren't sure.

Even in Fort Collins, the seat of the most vocal opposition to the project (including from the city council), residents support it by an almost 2-1 margin, 57 percent in favor to 30 percent opposed, Ciruli found.

The numbers also show people with higher levels of education were less likely to support it. Republicans supported it in larger numbers than Democrats.

Gary Wockner, a spokesman for the Save the Poudre Coalition, a group opposing the project, blasted the poll, calling it a "push poll" and saying the questions deceived respondents.

"This push poll is a desperate last-ditch attempt to prop up a dying project," he said. "The NISP ship is sinking."

The group went through several statements in the poll and said they and other questions were designed to frighten the public.

One such statement, about which respondents are asked whether they agree or disagree, says "local water providers should continue to provide water to major industries and businesses, such as Anheuser-Busch."

In a statement, the Save the Poudre Coalition said that sentence is a scare tactic to threaten the public.

"Anheuser-Busch (Budweiser) gets water from the city of Fort Collins, and Fort Collins is not even a participant in

NISP/Glade. Anheuser-Busch is under no threat of losing its water. Further, during Fort Collins City Council meetings, it has been stated by city staff that Fort Collins breweries are very concerned about NISP because NISP is a threat to their water quality and their profits," the statement reads.

The coalition had several other concerns about questions it said were designed to elicit a pro-Glade response.

"The push poll is filled with false information, manipulates the person on the phone, and never mentions any of the project's problems, like that this reservoir scheme will cost over a billion dollars, dry up and pave over farms, threaten Fort Collins' economy, and nearly drain the already degraded Poudre River," Wockner said.

In the poll, those who support NISP said overwhelmingly that it's because the area needs the water.

This sentiment is slightly stronger in Weld than in Larimer, a fact water officials said makes sense given Weld's stronger connection to agriculture.

Ciruli told the water board that regardless of NISP, Northern Coloradans strongly support the policies that guide it, including maintaining enough water for agricultural use and building new water storage.

"I saw a lot of positive feedback for the water organizations that are trying to manage these issues, to come up with solutions and engage the public," he said. "It provided a lot of good, solid information that you are on the road you wanted to be on. How disappointed they would be if they felt you were doing nothing?"

Eric Wilkinson, general manager of Northern Water, said that was as good a sign.

"It's nice to have that reinforcement that we're doing what our constituents want us to do," he said.

In Weld, 98 percent of respondents believe in maintaining open space and the farm economy. The number was 93 percent in Larimer.

Both counties' respondents wanted to avoid selling regional water to the Denver metro area—91 percent in Weld and 89 percent in Larimer.

That's a key point because under Colorado water law, entities other than Northern Water own a right to take water off the Poudre if Northern Water does not. One such entity is the city of Thornton.

Those who oppose the project said it was because they thought it would dry up the river or hurt the river. In Larimer, 43 percent of people who oppose NISP said it was because it would hurt the river. In Weld, 28 percent of respondents thought that.

More Weld residents who opposed the project believed government should stop building dams and reservoirs. Only 5 percent of people in Larimer believed that.

Ciruli noted that the numbers show support for NISP is not as robust as support for Northern Water's overall policies.

"But there are many things that we agree about public policy wise," he said. "You can get into the heat of talking about one single project ... when in fact the philosophy behind it is highly supported. Some people are backing all of these policy issues, but they might not like this particular project."

But Brian Werner, spokesman for Northern Water, said the support numbers still are high—high enough even in Fort Collins to be considered a landslide if this was an election, for instance.

"It's nice to see there is support," he said. "They may not be the ones who show up at city council meetings or write letters to the editor, but there is support."

In Larimer, 500 registered voters were surveyed from Aug. 8-11; 300 were polled in Weld from Aug. 11-14. The margin of error is plus or minus 4.4 percentage points in Larimer and higher in Weld, at plus or minus 5.7 percentage points.

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