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The Great Water War

The age-old debate over Colorado's most precious resource is poised to rage like the Poudre River in summertime

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Brian Werner remembers thinking he wouldn't get out of the Poudre Canyon in one piece.

Two decades ago, he and other representatives from the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District had the unenviable task of announcing plans to dam the Cache la Poudre River, creating a reservoir for long-term water storage downriver of Poudre Park.

"I didn't know if we were going to get out of there alive," he recalled, mostly kidding.

More than 20 years have passed and plans to capture the Poudre's waters have changed dramatically. But passionate opposition remains, and this spring, Werner might be watching his hide again, at least metaphorically.

He is the spokesman for Northern Water (the nickname for the NCWCD) and is trying to convince Northern Colorado residents of the benefits of the Northern Integrated Supply Project, known as NISP or the Glade Reservoir project.

Meeting Monday

What: 12 panelists will discuss the Glade Reservoir project Monday evening.

Who: Panelists include Brian Werner, public information officer for Northern Water; John Clarke, former Larimer County commissioner and Fort Collins councilman; Don Ament, former commissioner of the Colorado Department of Agriculture; Gary Wockner, member of Save the Poudre; Philip Cafaro, CSU philosophy professor and member of Fort Collins Audobon Society; and David Roy, Fort Collins councilman.

Where: Student Center at Front Range Community College, Harmony & Shields

When: 6:30 p.m. - 9 p.m.

How much: Free tickets will be distributed at the door 30 minutes before the program.



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Gary Wockner has become the face of opposition to a plan that will siphon water out of the Poudre River to accommodate future regional growth.

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The more than \$400 million project involves 15 communities and water districts and is designed to

ensure the region has enough water to accommodate population growth in the next 40 years. Opponents, who include growth skeptics and river aficionados, say the harm to the Poudre would be too great.

Werner and another 11 community experts and leaders will gather Monday at the student center at Front Range Community College for a panel on the project. The evening is almost certain to be contentious, as both sides ramp up their rhetoric in preparation for the release of the Army Corps of Engineers' environmental impact statement later this month.

The EIS is a comprehensive review of the project. Once the study is released, residents will have at least three months to file formal comments about the plan, though many groups plan to ask for even more time.

Groups like Save the Poudre promise that lawyers and scientists will examine the plan with microscopic attention, and opposition is already ardent in Fort Collins, where conservation groups are making a stand to protect one of Colorado's only remaining free-flowing rivers.

But the fight over Glade Reservoir is not just a fight about Fort Collins' scenic river.

It is about growth, sprawl, agriculture, the economy, recreation and a way of life that many feel is slowly dying: The agrarian culture that created Northern Colorado.

The region's growth threatens the peace between the old and the new West, where the irrigated plains of cattle, corn and sugar beets meet the Silicon Prairie of high-tech jobs, university research and customized green lawns.

It is a microcosm of the kind of fight shaping up throughout the American West, where water is life in the most literal sense. And there's one thing on which most people can agree: There's not enough to sustain the status quo.

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History

Plans to build a main-stem dam date to the mid-1980s, even before Werner worried about getting out of the canyon.

Several plans to dam the river, including at places like Idlewild and Grey Rock, spurred strong opposition. River supporters created a group called Friends of the Poudre and printed bumper stickers reading "Frankly, my dear, I don't want a dam," which are still a commodity.

"Those stickers have been around for 20 years, and they keep getting re-printed," noted Gary Wockner, a conservationist in Fort Collins and the public face of the newer Save the Poudre movement.

Congress eventually designated the Poudre as a Wild and Scenic River, which affords the corridor special protection. It is Colorado's only such river.

The designation, sponsored in the Senate by former Sen. Hank Brown and then-Rep. Wayne Allard, protected the river above the canyon mouth from future development.

“When they negotiated the wild and scenic river designation, they basically foreclosed the option of having an in-river dam,” said Reagan Waskom, director of the Colorado Water Resources Research Institute at Colorado State University.

But it left the door ajar for a reservoir in the lower Poudre corridor.

And because Northern Water owns a right to some of the Poudre’s high-flow water, that possibility never really dried up.

Snowpack-fed rivers like the Poudre have inconsistent flows, which are expressed in a hydrograph—a measurement of water flow over time.

“If you look at how snowpack rivers function, they are dry most of the year, and they start to rise, and in June they run like heck and in July they start to recede,” Waskom said.

Under the Byzantine system that is Colorado water law, Northern Water owns a right to divert water off the top of that hydrograph, which represents the highest flows of the river. It is considered a junior water right; the district could only take water during peak flow times and so long as interstate water compacts and more senior water right-holders are satisfied.

Northern Water managers add that Glade may also be used for in-stream flow improvements during dry times, thereby improving the river as it flows through Fort Collins.

The impact will be most obvious during the Poudre’s peak flows, when the river rages northwest of town as snow melts in the mountains. The environmental impacts may not be as immediately visible, however.

“High flows are part of the cycle,” Waskom said. “They are part of what flushes sediment; they are where the river comes into contact with its floodplain. There’s just a lot of things that happen in the watershed, and these rivers have sort of developed under this hydrograph which is high for a short period of time and goes low. The fish have evolved to it, birds have evolved to it ... So you’re kind of flattening out that hydrograph. More water in a low-flow period of time, well that’s good. Less water in the peak, well, it’s a tradeoff, and the tradeoff is about how do we have a secure water supply.”

Colorado water law dictates “first in time, first in right,” meaning those with earlier claims have to get what they need before more junior users can get their water. Waskom said the intent is to allocate scarcity.

Water owners have to use their water, and they can’t use more than they need. If they abandon their right to use water, it can be taken away.

That’s one reason why Northern has worked for so long on a Poudre reservoir project. If they don’t use their water right, a more junior right-holder—like the city of Thornton, for instance—can lay claim to the Poudre’s peak flow.

Advocates for Northern Water say they’d rather the water be used here, not to support exurban sprawl to the south.

“Northern Water has been delivering water to all of us for 70 years,” Werner said, noting the

district's creation as the foundation for the Colorado-Big Thompson Project, the engineering feat which fills Horsetooth Reservoir each year with water from the Colorado River. "We think it makes a whole lot more sense to have somebody like us working on these things, and working on mitigation, and lessen some of these impacts and improve the river where we can, rather than somebody who has no interest in the basin. We have a whole heck of a lot of interest in the basin. We are the basin."

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Conservation

Gary Wockner believes plans to dam the Poudre have lasted so long because there are still resources to be had: Conservation will come after the available resources have been gobbled up.

"This is one of the last places on the Front Range of Colorado to get water out of a river. That's why (more than \$400) million is staring you in the face," he said. "There's water left in the river, so there's a massive grab to get all they can."

He and other environmental advocates push water conservation as the primary means for shoring up scarce supplies, and say water districts and municipalities have not worked hard enough in that arena.

"The real solution to this is entering into conservation agreements with farmers," he said.

Environmental groups increasingly favor those agricultural partnerships, in concert with conservation and new "smart" infrastructure.

Becky Long, water caucus coordinator with the Colorado Environmental Coalition, said environmental groups favor "low-hanging fruit" like conservation and expanding existing storage infrastructure, rather than building new storage.

The Environmental Coalition, Trout Unlimited and other groups completed a study in 2005 called "Facing Our Future," which examined possible improvements to several existing and proposed water storage projects. The report did not address NISP, which Long said irked some people at first.

"When we looked at the purpose and need (for it), we felt that a lot of the population numbers were a bit speculative. We sort of felt like the project itself was developed with maybe not the best terms and needs," she said. "We said, 'We don't think you can make a project smart that we don't agree with.' And we still look at that project very much with the same sort of mindset. The participant cities involved in NISP, some of them have started looking at the low-hanging fruit, but most of them haven't done so in any sort of meaningful way."

Werner disputes that, saying that the NISP communities have reduced their gallons-per-capita consumption rate by 30 percent in the past 12 years.

"So don't tell me these people aren't practicing water conservation. They do, and they have to. Water is not as easy in somewhere like Windsor or Erie or Johnstown as it is in Fort Collins; those communities don't have a water portfolio going back 150 years," he said.

He said conservation is not the only answer.

"You can only meet a certain portion of our future needs. That doesn't add water, all it does is reduce

demand,” he said.

And demand is likely to grow, according to most projections. Even with NISP, five member communities might still see water shortages by 2025, and all 14 communities may have shortages by 2050, according to Northern Water.

Wockner said the project would not solve the region’s future water woes.

“It’s a little Band-Aid approach,” he said.

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Storage

Glade Reservoir would be about five miles long and 260 feet deep. Located northwest of Fort Collins along the Great Hogback, the reservoir would require the relocation of U.S. Highway 287. It would be fed by a forebay connected to the North Poudre Supply Canal, an existing structure near the mouth of the canyon that can divert water from the Poudre’s main stem.

At 170,000 acre-feet of capacity, Glade Reservoir would be slightly larger than Fort Collins’ Horsetooth Reservoir. Combined with a companion reservoir in Galeton, in eastern Weld County, the project would provide 40,000 “firm,” or guaranteed, acre-feet of water a year.

An acre-foot is a measure of water equaling an acre of water a foot deep. One acre-foot is enough water to meet the needs of two average homes for a year. So 40,000 acre-feet of water provides enough water for 80,000 new homes, give or take.

Many population estimates, including from the North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization, predict that Northern Colorado will be home to more than 1 million residents in the next 30 years, so 80,000 new homes is not a far-fetched figure.

While not everyone believes that amount of growth is a good thing, most people agree it is coming.

“Northern Colorado is an absolutely wonderful place to live. It’s pretty, we’ve got the mountains here, we’re close enough to enjoy Denver amenities without having to live there ... it’s why people are moving here,” Werner said. “I wish we could figure out how to throw away the key, but I’m realistic enough to know that we can’t do that.”

He said when new residents move here and when new builders buy land, they will all sniff out water first. Ensuring a long-term supply will help protect more farms from the “buy-and-dry” syndrome, wherein land is purchased for the water that comes with it.

Wockner said he doesn’t buy Northern Water’s argument that NISP will save farms, calling it “misinformation.”

“If the growth comes, it’s going to come on top of farms. Whether or not that project is built, that farmland will be turned over to development,” he said.

Meanwhile, cities will buy up the water rights owned by those farms, he said.

Ron Brinkman is all too familiar with that.

“It’s certainly not a new struggle, but it seems to be a tougher struggle every year,” said Brinkman, who is the general manager for the Greeley-Loveland Irrigation Co., one of the oldest water distribution companies in the region. “The amount of water every year does not increase; sometimes it is even less, and that amount of water has to spread over more and more area and more people.”

Brinkman grew up on a farm between Fort Collins and Ault and remembers dry years back then, too.

“So it’s not a new thing to be short of water. It’s just there’s a lot more competition for water than there used to be,” he said.

He said he understood environment-oriented opposition to Glade in Fort Collins, along with worries about future water storage to ensure green lawns, parks and general quality of life.

But he also wondered how people might have felt about water storage had the region not already had the Colorado-Big Thompson Project, which brings supplemental water from the Western Slope to 30 Front Range communities and almost 700,000 acres of irrigated farmland. The mind-boggling project spans 150 miles from east to west and encompasses 12 reservoirs, 35 miles of tunnels, 95 miles of canals and 700 miles of transmission lines for collection, distribution and power generation.

“If it hadn’t happened when it did, I don’t know that it would have ever happened,” Brinkman said. “I don’t think in today’s mindset, a project of that magnitude would have ever happened, because of the environmental concerns. And I know of a lot of farms under the Greeley-Loveland (company) that would be critically water short if it were not for their supplemental water through C-BT ... and the municipalities have larger blocks of C-BT than farmers do. We would really see the effects of dry years if it wasn’t for those large blocks of C-BT owned by Greeley, Loveland and Fort Collins.”

Similarly, residents decades from now might thank their forebears for thinking ahead with Glade, he said.

He believes the region’s economy—which is still largely centered on agriculture—could change forever if farms dry up en masse.

“I’m sure that dollar that the farmer gets—for a hay crop, let’s say—gets spent many, many times over in the community,” he said.

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The river

In one Fort Collins store, farm equipment directly benefits from the Poudre’s presence. But Danny Friedman doesn’t sell very many tractor tires for use in actual tractors.

The huge inner tubes available at the North College Big O Tires, where Friedman is a business partner with Ron Lautzenheiser, are for recreation, specifically for Poudre river tubers.

Customers en route to river entry points in LaPorte often stop in asking for tire tubes, Friedman said. So about four or five years ago, Big O started ordering the right kind.

“People were asking, ‘Why don’t you get tubes? Well, we can get ‘em, obviously. The large, rear tractor-sized tubes is what they are. They generally can accommodate an exceptionally large person,” he said.

It’s not just that the Big O store has seen increased traffic or profits from the river: The store offers a product it would not have sold otherwise, thanks to the Poudre.

The store sells between 200 and 500 tubes during summer months.

Big O is just one organization that has seen immediate benefits because of its proximity to the Poudre. The city of Fort Collins is hoping to capitalize on the river, too, with a planned Downtown River District redevelopment project, Beet Street cultural initiatives and even the UniverCity Connections program with CSU.

Long, from the environmental coalition, said her group has met with people from several river-related projects, noting that the Poudre is beloved by many in the community.

“People don’t want to build a river corridor around a dry riverbed,” she said.

But, as Werner points out, they need river water for other things, too.

“I just think it’s the smart thing to do, it’s the responsible thing to do for the mix that makes Northern Colorado,” he said. “The alternatives are much worse. The water is going to go somewhere; it’s eventually going to be used.”

About NISP

« The Northern Integrated Supply Project includes Glade and Galeton reservoirs. Glade Reservoir, at 170,000 acre-feet capacity, is slightly larger than Horsetooth Reservoir.

« Construction of Glade will require the relocation of seven miles of U.S. Highway 287 northwest of Fort Collins.

« Galeton Reservoir, located northeast of Greeley, will provide local farmers with new water from the South Platte River. In exchange, the farmers will allow Glade Reservoir to use Poudre River water to which they are entitled.

« The project includes 15 communities and water districts and is estimated at more than \$400 million.

« The Army Corps of Engineers is expected to release the results of a four-year environmental impact study at the end of this month, which will be followed by several months of public input.

« If given the green light, the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District estimates Glade could be finished by 2014.

« For More Information:

www.savethepoudre.org

www.Northern Water.org

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