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What if NISP isn't built?

By Cherry Sokoloski
North Forty News

Participants in the Northern Integrated Supply Project are crossing their fingers that the project will be approved. Opponents are hoping that the Army Corps of Engineers will choose the "no action" alternative and the project will go away.

So, what happens if the project isn't built?

The largest impact of "no action" would be the loss of irrigated farmland in northern Colorado, since growing communities would buy up more water from agriculture. Chandler Peter of the Army Corps said it's hard to predict just how much ag land would be lost to production, but the agency estimates the loss at 33,600 to 69,000 acres.

Project opponents, including the Save the Poudre Coalition, say that water conservation and efficiency, on the part of both cities and agriculture, could have a dramatic impact on water demand, thereby protecting the rivers and slowing the loss of ag land.

"We've reached the point where improved conservation and efficiency are going to be necessary if the region is going to continue to grow as it is," said Mark Easter, a botanist and member of the Sierra Club Poudre Canyon Group.

Both sides agree that, whether or not NISP is built, cities and towns will continue to buy up ag water for their thirsty residents. Brian Werner of the Northern Water Conservancy District, which is spearheading NISP, said more ag land will go out of production in any case, but he'd prefer that not all the demand for domestic water be satisfied by drying up agriculture.

Peter said it would be a mistake for the public to think that "no action" means that everything--including the Poudre River--would stay the same. Communities

would look for other ways to obtain drinking water, and many of those would still impact the river.

Effect on Poudre

NISP proposes to use a junior water right on the Poudre, the Grey Mountain right, to fill Glade Reservoir. If the project isn't built, other entities such as Thornton could exercise their rights on the river that are junior to the Grey Mountain right. In that case, streamflow would decrease just as it would with NISP.

Furthermore, Peter noted, there are ways to obtain the Poudre River water without building a reservoir. Existing canals and ditches could be used, with pipelines built to those canals. Projects such as those would not require Army Corps permits, Peter said, so the agency could neither scrutinize the projects nor require any mitigation.

If the project fails, some entities might join forces to build pipelines, said NISP project manager Carl Brouwer. For instance, Thornton might be able to recruit partners for a pipeline from the Poudre.

"No action just becomes a more scattered approach," said Brouwer. "There would be more dry-up and more pipelines built, done in a way that wouldn't require permits."

Community perspective

The 12 NISP partners include the Fort Collins-Loveland Water District and Windsor. Officials from those entities spoke with the North Forty News recently about alternative plans if NISP isn't approved.

Windsor has grown from a burg of 5,000 in 1990 to a city of almost 19,000 in 2008. According to Dennis Wagner, director of engineering for Windsor, if NISP isn't built the city will continue to buy up Colorado-Big Thompson water, as it has been doing for the past several years. C-BT water can be used for either ag or municipal needs.

Windsor also owns shares of North Poudre Irrigation Co. water, which has both C-BT and ag components. Up until now, the city has rented the ag water back to farmers in the Wellington area.

"There are going to be some people really hurting," Wagner said, if Windsor has to convert that ag water to domestic drinking water. Many farmers have sold their NPIC shares, and they rely on renting water from cities.

The Fort Collins-Loveland Water District serves a wide area lying between Harmony Road and north Loveland. Its service area includes fast-growing Timnath, and district manager Mike DiTullio said he anticipates a need for 8,000 to 10,000 new taps in Timnath over the next 20 years.

FCLWD has several plans for procuring more water if NISP isn't built. First, the district would continue to buy C-BT and NPIC water. The district is also a participant in the Halligan-Seaman project, which if approved would enlarge two reservoirs on the North Fork of the Poudre. In addition, the district is considering water storage in gravel pits now being mined in the LaPorte area.

Like Windsor, the district owns shares of NPIC water, and without NISP DiTullio anticipates going to water court to use the ag portion of those shares. The loss of rental water for ag would be one of the most significant impacts of the "no action" alternative, DiTullio said. Also, the price of C-BT water would likely go up if the project isn't built.

DiTullio said the absence of NISP would not slow development. The district could turn down developers, he said, but as long as water is available for purchase, he will go out and buy it.

According to the NISP EIS, cost is another factor favoring NISP for the communities involved. The project is estimated to cost about \$426 million, while procuring water under the "no action" alternative is estimated to cost about \$830 million.

Dryland problems

Brouwer said other areas in the state have experienced substantial dry-up of agriculture, and the result has not been pretty. Some towns along the Arkansas River have literally dried up, he said. Noxious weeds have taken hold, and it has been difficult to get native grasslands reestablished.

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