

College Avenue

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Where the River Meets the Road

The great debate over the proposed Glade Reservoir and the economy

You're late for your painfully early morning class and in desperate need of a shower. You fly to the bathroom to try and snag a quick rinse in five minutes or less. You clobber the faucet, anticipating the initial shock of cold water, only to discover a dry metal desert.

You recall paying utilities recently, but brush it off as a freak accident; you simply don't have the time. As you haul onto campus, you begin to notice the urgent hushed whispers over your racing heartbeat, and then it hits you. There's no water to drink, to fill our toilets, to nourish the food we eat — or to make beer!

Two groups of people want to make sure this scenario never becomes a reality. Unfortunately, it has led to an all-out water battle between creation and conservation for more than seven years.

With populations predicted to double in the next 20 to 40 years, the communities of northeastern Colorado are finding water in short supply. Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District (NCWCD) has been spearheading efforts to organize a solution.

In conjunction with 15 water providers along the Front Range, The Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP), has thoroughly analyzed the options available with regard to water supply, and determined that the creation of Glade and Galeton reservoirs would be the best balance between conservation and the growing demand for water.

Because of a weak water infrastructure, those who support NISP believe that Northern Colorado is not ready to accommodate a growing population, and it faces the possibility of local farmlands drying up if efforts to create a new water supply are not made.

“When the farm land dries up, as it will inevitably do during a drought, that farm will turn to sand, which will cause essentially another dust bowl,” said Sean P. Conway, Weld County commissioner. “This is a critical project for the future of this region.”

The water infrastructure in Northern Colorado has remained virtually unchanged during the last decade and it has been more than three decades since a storage reservoir was created. “Projects that plan for future water needs are necessary and desperately needed,” states the NISP website.

“There's a common misperception that this is somehow damming the Poudre. It's not,” said Carl Brouwer, the project manager for NISP. “The reservoir is an off channel of the Poudre and water will be pumped to the reservoir.”

NISP participants examined hundreds of alternatives within the South Platte, St. Vrain, Big Thompson and Cache la Poudre watersheds in 2003.

NISP participants came to the conclusion that it would be best to combine the proposed Glade Reservoir with the South Platte Water Conservation Project to allow for the distribution of water to suppliers.

Glade Reservoir would be located just northwest of Fort Collins and would require the relocation of a seven-mile stretch of US Highway 287. To fill the reservoir, water would be diverted from the Poudre River using the pre-existing Poudre Valley Canal. The diversion would occur during the high-flow seasons of the river and would take place below the scenic sections of the Poudre.

“You have to store the water when you have it in the wet years so you can use it in the dry years,” said Brian Werner, the public information officer for NCWCD. “The last three years have been very wet, and we’ve waved goodbye to a lot of water we could have put in reservoirs.”

What happens to all of that water once it’s diverted? Before the water is pumped into Glade, it would move through an existing canal to be stored for delivery to the 15 water providers.

When a portion of the water is diverted to Glade Reservoir, replacement water from the Galeton Reservoir will be transferred, via pipeline directly to the two irrigating companies. The exchange will amount to one quarter of the provider’s overall supply of water.

“As part of our water mitigation package, we are actually going to release water during the winter when the Poudre often dries up at multiple locations,” Brouwer said.

This arrangement will allow the Glade Reservoir to provide an additional water yield of 40,000 acre-feet, which will meet a portion of current and future water needs in Northern Colorado. By partnering with agriculture, NISP will also be able to provide water to cities and new industries without taking away water rights to irrigate crops.

However, an alternate solution was quickly brewing as word of the proposed reservoirs came to a head. The idea came from Gary Wockner and Mark Easter, co-founders of Save the Poudre Coalition (STP), created nearly seven years ago.

As a group of regional, statewide and national conservation groups, they are all in support of seeing the Poudre go untouched.

“If [NISP’s reservoir’s are] built, less than 25 percent of the Poudre River will still flow through Fort Collins,” Wockner said. “In some months, NISP will drain out 71percent of the water still flowing through town.”

STP believes that the Poudre is already critically depleted, with nearly 60 percent of the water missing already. Draining it further would only cause even more damage.

“Conservation is a big part of the solution to our future water supply needs,” said Wockner. “Nearly 50 percent of all water goes to watering lawns in Northern Colorado – if someone wants to help protect Colorado’s rivers, they should consider Xeriscaping rather than watering bluegrass.

Also, indoor conservation with upgrades to faucets, washing machines, dishwashers and other appliances can make a big difference.”

The process of bringing the reservoir into creation first began in 2004, when the proposal to begin building the reservoir transitioned into the federal review process. Save the Poudre began their opposition shortly thereafter.

In 2008, the first draft of the Environmental Impact Statement was released. Presently, a second draft is under construction, after which a final decision may ultimately be reached.

Whichever side supporters lean toward, questions about the economical impacts, both positive and negative, surrounding the subject have been brought up.

Beyond the initial costs to fund the project, a NISP fact sheet states that the “availability of water and the economic health of a community are intrinsically, inextricably linked.”

The fact sheet also states that the employment rate in the northern Front Range area is expected to increase by more than 70 percent between 2005 and 2030, making this population the quickest growing region for employment along the Front Range.

“Weld County, for example, is Colorado’s leading producer of beef cattle, grain, sugar beets and dairy products,” according to a NISP fact sheet. “Weld is among the top 10 agricultural-producing counties in the nation, and the only one not located in California. The country’s agricultural products annually create over \$1 billion of market value.”

Leprino Foods is also on track to build the second largest plant in the U.S. in Greeley, Colo. – creating an additional 500 job opportunities. With the water from the project, the ranchers who rely on that water supply will be able to raise upward of 80,000 more cows that will be used for milk and cheese production, along with the crops necessary to feed them.

“Colorado is in between fifth or eighth, depending on the source, in agricultural production, which puts billions of dollars back into the Colorado economy,” Conway said.

In addition, factor in the need for all of the construction and contractor jobs required and the attraction for traditional and renewable energy firms that will cause a spike in job opportunities.

What about those who don’t wish to work on the reservoir, but enjoy it for its recreational value? Like Horsetooth, Glade and Galeton will offer recreational advantages for those who wish to utilize them.

“Glade Reservoir would be the largest reservoir in Northern Colorado, which leaves a huge potential for huge recreation profit added into the economy,” Werner said. “[An estimated] \$17 million a year. That’s not chump change.”

STP is a large proponent for creating job opportunities with a “green” environmental twist that will rival the additional jobs proposed under the creation of the reservoirs. Healthy Rivers Alternative is a proposal to save water supply rather than create it.

“The Healthy Rivers Alternative will create jobs in the green economy, water conservation, farmland protection, river tourism, sustainable development and water recycling,” Wockner said.

Looking to the future, a foreseeable end — or rather beginning — to the project has yet to see a set date, as the creation-versus-conservation debate continues. Those who oppose NISP, such as STP, are very concerned with the ecological and environmental impacts that go above and beyond monetary consequences.

“Besides draining the Poudre to a trickle and threatening a variety of plant and animal species, the NISP/Glade project would severely deplete the already beleaguered ‘June Rise,’ the natural increase in stream flows that occurs during snowmelt that is critical to the overall health of the Poudre River ecosystem,” according to the project impacts section of the STP website.

The STP site adds that other effects will likely take place if the Poudre is diverted, such as elevated carbon levels and water contamination, increased chances of property damage in the event of a flood and a potentially shorter rafting/tubing season, to name a few.

“[NISP] has described the significant diminishment of water quality as well as the harm the project would have to fish, wildlife and riparian vegetation,” according to the STP website. “The objective of the Clean Water Act is to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the nation’s waters. The proposed NISP project cannot ever lead to this objective.”

However, many who support NISP still refuse to come to a compromise with Save the Poudre or any others against the new construction plans. For both sides, the solution is simply left to one choice or the other — create or conserve.

“[The NISP opposition] are in denial if they think conservation is a viable option,” Conway said. “At this point, doing nothing would be more expensive than meeting the water needs of the Northern Colorado area.”

Brouwer continues that at this stage in the game, there is truly no turning back, opposition or not.

“Our 15 participating sponsors have already paid over \$10 million,” Brouwer said. “[The project] has been in the permitting stage since 2004. The permitting process on these water projects takes much longer than it used to. There are lots of new regulations and rules that need to be followed.”

Even with numerous regulations, the opposition in favor of conserving such a precious resource is determined to make their point heard.

“There is no danger that towns will not get water,” Wockner said. “We support them getting water in ways that does not drain and destroy the Poudre River. Conservation is an important piece of the puzzle, as is better growth management and cooperatively working with farmers to share water.”

Both solutions come with economical, environmental and physical effects of creation versus conservation. Looming in our ever-present future is the possibility that we will wake up to a thirst that cannot quite be quenched, even by the mighty river in many of our backyards.

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