

Northern Colorado Business Report

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By Steve Porter

County ag board takes shots at Save the Poudre

The ongoing controversy about whether a proposed \$426 million water-storage project would be good for Northern Colorado marked another step along the way when the Larimer County Agricultural Advisory Board issued an opinion that mostly endorsed the Northern Integrated Supply Project put forward by Northern Water District.

Val Manning, chair of the advisory board, said the Larimer County Board of Commissioners asked the citizen volunteer board to look at the arguments both for and against the project, which aims to create a two-reservoir storage system that would deliver water to more than a dozen cities, towns and water districts if it is ultimately approved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The two reservoirs - Glade, which would be located northwest of Fort Collins outside Poudre Canyon and be filled with water from the Poudre River, and Galeton, to be sited east of Greeley and filled with South Platte River water - would hold 170,000 acre-feet and 40,000 acre-feet respectively.

The NISP project was proposed several years ago and aims to provide water for municipal growth and agriculture. But objections from opponents - mainly the Fort Collins-based Save the Poudre group - has stalled the project.

Last spring, Save the Poudre published "The Farm Facts About NISP," which alleges that NISP would accelerate the buy-up and subdivision of irrigated farms, increase salinization of crop land, and force the dry-up of 67,000 acres of irrigated farm land in Northern Colorado.

The dozen-member ag board heard presentations from both Save the Poudre and Northern Water District before issuing its opinion to the commissioners.

The opinion took the form of addressing several of the points made by Save the Poudre - and dismantling them.

For example, Save the Poudre stated in its "Farm Facts" that NISP would accelerate the buy-up and subdivision of irrigated farms in Northern Colorado. The AAB said it disagreed with that conclusion and noted that "the need for additional water supply is the result of continuing growth in (the) region."

"The need for NISP is the result of growth which has occurred and will occur, rather than NISP being the cause of growth," the AAB told the commissioners.

The AAB acknowledged that cities have no choice when it comes to coping with new growth other than buying up ag water rights and drying up agriculture around them or through new water storage projects like NISP.

While the AAB opinion was unanimous, a minority opinion was added that gave some weight to Save the Poudre allegations about NISP.

For example, the minority opinion notes that NISP communities would pay for their water through new

population growth, "which puts more pressure on the development of new rooftops to pay for NISP."

Gary Wockner, Save the Poudre spokesman, called the AAB opinion a "split opinion" that "supported much of Save the Poudre's analysis" of NISP.

"It's a minority opinion that generally agrees with what we put forward, so we believe it is a split opinion," Wockner said.

On the other hand, Brian Werner, Northern Water spokesman, said the AAB opinion was another endorsement in a long line of endorsements from farm groups and organizations supporting NISP.

"There's a reason virtually every ag organization in the state has endorsed it," Werner said. "We were very pleased and we think they were spot-on with the way the (opinion) came out."

Werner said NISP aims to prevent the very things Save the Poudre is warning against.

"If you don't have this, you do accelerate the buy-and-dry," he said.

AAB Chair Manning said the intent of NISP is not to harm agriculture by encouraging growth in the region.

"I think a lot of people look at NISP and say if we do this, it'll encourage more growth," she said. "But the ag advisory board believes (that growth) is already here. It's not a matter of, 'If we build it, they will come.' Because they're here and more are coming here."

County Commissioner Lew Gaiter said the board of commissioners asked the ag board for an evaluation of NISP to better understand the arguments for and against it.

"It wasn't necessarily to take a stand, although we've been asked," he said. "All three commissioners individually have endorsed it. But we wanted to make sure before we take a position for the county that we'd heard all the information."

Gaiter said he personally would like to see Glade Reservoir built soon.

"If we'd had that reservoir built two years ago, it would be full," he said.

The Army Corps of Engineers is reviewing the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for NISP and is expected to issue it sometime in 2012.

Steve Porter covers agribusiness and natural resources for the Northern Colorado Business Report. He can be reached at 970-232-3147 or at sporter@ncbr.com.