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Editorial

Reservoirs the better alternative

Wouldn't it be wonderful if a bit of this year's exceptional spring runoff could be captured and stored for dry months ahead, or even for drought years, instead of flowing to Nebraska?

That's the goal of NISP, the Northern Integrated Supply Project, which would create two reservoirs, including one that would capture Cache la Poudre River water north of Fort Collins. Eleven towns and four water districts along the northern Front Range -- among those, Firestone, Frederick, Dacono, Lafayette and parts of Boulder County -- would share its reserves.

Years in the planning, NISP still might be years in the coming. An Army Corps of Engineers' final decision on the water-supply project isn't likely to happen until 2013.

Granted, the construction and filling one of the largest reservoirs in the state would not be an environmentally neutral act. Concerns about the effect on the Poudre River should be addressed.

But just as important is the impact of not constructing the reservoirs. It's called the "No Action Alternative," and it considers what the region's cities would do without this added water storage. Among the likely alternatives: reliance on Colorado-Big Thompson water, the use of gravel pits for storage, additional groundwater pumping and the transfer of water rights from agricultural to municipal use.

Each alternative has its limits, and most present long-term problems. Storage still will be required. Poorer water quality likely will require improved water-treatment facilities. And worse, northeast Colorado's fertile farmland could become parched.

Colorado has abundant water. The problem is, it all runs downhill. Short of halting municipal growth -- which isn't going to happen -- Colorado must create storage for its supplies so that municipal, commercial and agricultural uses are secured for years to come.

NISP is a reasonable response to this need. Its environmental impacts should be taken into consideration -- whether it's built or not.