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By Eric Bellamy

The Road Ahead, Part Six: Greeley and other Weld communities plan their own water strikes

The city of Thornton fired the first shot in the war for water 25 years ago. Now Greeley and other Weld communities are planning their own strikes.

Through a series of transactions between a city and farmers 25 years ago, the alarms sounded.

The city of Thornton's purchase of about 21,000 acres of ground near Ault and Pierce in 1986 — an acquisition made by the municipality to obtain the 17,000 acre-feet of irrigated agriculture water on that farmland — served as the wake-up call for northern Colorado that had been coming for years, experts say.

It forced everyone to recognize the realities of living in a semi-arid region: When it comes to cities and farms, there is no growth without water. And the growth of one can threaten the survival of the other.

"This region saw a lot of things change after that," said Brian Werner, public information officer and historian at Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District in Berthoud, who has worked for the NCWCD for 30 years.

"Because of the work of our forefathers in northern Colorado, we've historically had excellent supplies of water," he added. "When the city of Thornton made that purchase, it opened everyone's eyes up here to the fact that municipalities to the south of us were seeking our supplies.

"It was probably a long time coming."

Others, including Weld County Commissioner Sean Conway, also remember Thornton's purchase as a historic moment.

"Up to that point, the 'buying and drying' of farmland by municipalities was discussed, but wasn't a reality," he said.

Since then, municipalities frequently buy agriculture land for water rights. But Werner and Conway want to stop the trend to protect the future of agriculture in northern Colorado.

They have two other major water concerns: the amount of water flowing down-river and out of the state, and the rapid population growth along the northern Front Range.

"The bottom line is, at this rate, we're going to run out of water," Werner said.

More Water Storage is Key

With an eye toward the future, municipalities and water districts in northern Colorado have spent the past couple of decades pushing water development plans.

And Werner, Conway and many others believe that more water storage, along with water conservation, is the key to securing the future of northern Colorado — where cities face doubled populations within the next 20 to 40 years.

The Statewide Water Supply Initiative study conducted for the state's leading water policy board estimates that in the South Platte Basin alone there will be a water supply gap of between 36,000 and 170,000 acre-feet by 2050.

Water storage for the future is viewed as so vital to the northern Front Range that the 15 participating municipalities and water districts of the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP, have spent about \$10 million during the past seven years just to plan and analyze the endeavor.

But there is no guarantee that NISP — a project that includes the construction of two new reservoirs in northern Colorado — will ever take shape. The federal government continues to analyze the Environmental Impact Statement.

A Closer Look at NISP

NISP — estimated to cost nearly \$500 million — is a regional water supply project coordinated by the water conservancy district with the goal of providing participants with about 40,000 acre-feet of new water supply annually.

One acre-foot of water serves 2½ families of four for one year.

It's the largest water-storage project in northern Colorado since the Colorado-Big Thompson Project was built between 1937 and 1957. If approved by the federal government, the project could take four to eight years to complete.

Two New Reservoirs

» The Glade Reservoir would be located northwest of Fort Collins and north of Horsetooth Reservoir and could store 170,000 acre-feet of water, making it the largest reservoir in northern Colorado.

The water to fill Glade Reservoir would be diverted from the Poudre River using the existing Poudre Valley Canal. There would be no new structures on the river, according to the NCWCD.

» The Galeton Reservoir would be located east of Ault and northeast of Greeley and hold about 40,000 acre-feet of water. The water would be diverted from the South Platte River downstream from Greeley.

Galeton water would be delivered to two agricultural irrigation companies — the New Cache La Poudre Irrigating Company in Lucerne and the Larimer and Weld Irrigation Company in Eaton — in exchange for Poudre River water they currently use. NCWCD officials say more than half of the water that NISP will divert from the Poudre River is water that has already been diverted for decades.

More Reasons NISP is Being Pushed

According to officials at the water conservancy district, in 2009, more than 90,000 acre-feet of water left Colorado that would have been available for NISP storage, had the project been online.

The 15 municipalities and water districts included in the proposed NISP — which includes the cities of Windsor, Evans and Eaton and the Central Weld County Water District, but not the city of Greeley — sit in an area that receives about 15 inches of rain, less than half the precipitation in the Midwest.

Supporters' studies suggest that without NISP, more than 60,000 acres of farmland in the area could dry up because cities would have to buy agricultural water rights instead of using the water that would be available through NISP. The project has generated endorsements from numerous major farm organization in the region and their statewide affiliates.

NCWCD officials and NISP supporters say the addition of two new NISP reservoirs — in addition to addressing future water needs — would provide jobs and offer recreational opportunities.

Not Everyone is on Board

The Save the Poudre Coalition — comprised of 20 environmental organizations — has opposed NISP since the project began taking shape in 2004.

"We support Greeley and Weld County meeting their water needs, but we do not support taking more water out of and destroying the Poudre," said Gary Wockner, an ecological scientist, activist and writer from Fort Collins who serves as the executive director and spokesman for the Save the Poudre Coalition, which he co-founded.

Wockner said 60 percent of the water that comes through the Poudre Canyon is already drained out of the river before it reaches Fort Collins, and NISP would take that amount down to 25 percent. That further depletion of the river would hurt wildlife, fisheries, forests and recreational use along the river in Fort Collins — a city that's invested vast amounts of money into open spaces along the Poudre River, Wockner said.

The city of Fort Collins has also voiced concerns about the project.

In response to NISP, the Save the Poudre Coalition has created The Healthy Rivers Alternative, a proposed water-supply project that would combine "aggressive water conservation, water reusing and recycling, better land-use planning and growth management, and improved cooperative relationships with farmers," instead of "draining the Poudre," as Wockner believes NISP would do.

Werner says The Healthy Rivers Alternative "doesn't work in reality."

"We can't conserve our way to the needed future supply," said Werner, noting that much of the NCWCD's efforts focus on water conservation. "Many municipalities and water districts in our region have put forth great efforts toward conservation, and they've made a tremendous difference. But that's not going to solve all of our needs."

A Lack of Alternatives for Some Municipalities

Werner and Conway said there are few choices for the smaller of the 15 NISP participants — with less money and resources — that are waiting for the federal government to OK the project.

They noted that some of the municipalities and water districts have already exhausted their water supplies in recent dry years, and that the only alternative for them during those times is to buy water rights from agriculture producers.

“Some of the municipalities and water districts in this area are at a critical crossroads,” Conway said. “That’s why we have to go down swinging on (NISP).”

The City of Greeley’s Water Storage Efforts

Greeley is not a NISP participant; it has storage plans of its own.

Jon Monson, director of the city of Greeley’s Water and Sewer Department, said the city’s current supply will meet the needs of the community for only 25 more years, maybe less.

In preparation, Greeley officials want to expand the Milton Seaman Reservoir, one of six high-mountain reservoirs from which the city draws its water.

The reservoir holds about 5,000 acre-feet of water, and the proposed project calls for it to be expanded more than 10-fold to 53,000 acre-feet. The expansion would allow Greeley to pull 7,800 acre-feet of water off the reservoir annually, up from the 750 acre-feet it can pull now.

Greeley uses about 45,000 acre-feet of water per year; demand is expected to grow to about 65,000 acre-feet by 2050.

After initiating efforts in 2004, the draft Environmental Impact Statement for the project is expected by 2013, and a final EIS is expected by 2015. Afterward, construction would take two years and filling the reservoir could take another five to 10 years.

The city is also seeking approval to build gravel pits for storage on the Poudre and Big Thompson rivers. If approved, all three should be completed within 10 years.

Another water storage effort is The Windy Gap Firming Project. The 25-year-old Windy Gap Project near Granby diverts water from the Colorado River to the Front Range via the Colorado-Big Thompson Project on a space-available basis.

According to Monson, during wet years when water is available for Windy Gap diversions, Lake Granby is often full with little or no space for the water. During dry years, the water right can be too junior to come into priority, so no water is available to pump.

Greeley is allotted 4,400 acre-feet of water annually from the Windy Gap Project, but that supply hasn’t always been available. The Windy Gap Firming Project was proposed to ensure reliable future deliveries.

Nine other municipalities, including Evans, participates in the project, along with the Central Weld County Water District and two other districts.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is expected to publish the final Environmental Impact Statement for the Windy Gap Firming Project in November.

All of Greeley’s future efforts combined, if approved, would sustain the city’s water needs until about 2050, Monson said, although it will come at a price. City water rates are expected to increase by about 45 percent during the next decade.

“Everyone wants more water,” Monson said, “and they’re going to have to pay for it.”