

Hickenlooper to Obama: Colorado faces gap in water supplies

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By Bruce Finley

Driven by drought, Gov. John Hickenlooper is urging President Obama and federal engineers to speed decisions on proposed water projects designed to sustain urban growth.

A [letter to Obama](#) seeks help spurring decisions on Denver Water's diversion of 18,000 acre-feet of Colorado River Basin water from the west side of the Continental Divide to an expanded Gross Reservoir west of Boulder. A separate letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers asks that the Northern Integrated Supply Project — which would siphon the Cache la Poudre River into new reservoirs storing 215,000 acre-feet of water — be given a high priority.

Colorado faces "a significant gap in our supplies to provide water for future growth — a gap that cannot be met by conservation and efficiencies alone," Hickenlooper began in a June 5 letter sent to the White House and copied to cabinet secretaries and agency chiefs.

"We urge you to exercise your authority to coordinate your agencies and bring an expeditious conclusion to the federal permitting processes for this essential project, in order that we can have certainty moving forward as a state," he wrote.

For years, state planners have warned of a looming water supply gap in Colorado, where today's population of around 5.1 million is expected to reach 8.7 million to 10.3 million by 2050.

Hickenlooper has emphasized water conservation as a solution to avert shortages. He appointed former state agriculture commissioner John Stulp as a special advisor to help address water issues. State natural resources officials, while not ruling out major projects, have mostly stayed mum as federal review and permitting processes take their course.

Hickenlooper's quest for quicker decisions wins praise from water providers.

"Yes, we're going to keep doing conservation. But you cannot conserve your way to a future water supply," said Brian Werner, spokesman for the Northern Water Conservation District, which is driving the \$490 million NISP project. "We're going to have to store more of it. We're optimistic that he gets that."

But it irks some conservationists.

"Water projects that further drain and destroy Colorado's rivers are a non-starter for us. The rivers already are in terrible shape," said Gary Wockner, director of Save the Poudre, a Fort Collins-based NISP opposition group.

Water conservation "is the faster, cheaper, better alternative" to ensuring adequate water supplies, said Drew Beckwith, a Water Resource Advocates policy expert and organizer of a campaign to cut daily per capita water consumption across the seven-state Colorado River Basin to less than 90 gallons.

"It's a bit discouraging that the governor isn't taking as aggressive a posture on water conservation as on new water supply projects," he said.

A response to Hickenlooper's letter from Corps of Engineers District Commander Robert Ruch said a draft environmental impact analysis for NISP should be done by 2013.

Denver Water officials have been told a final federal environmental statement for the proposed diversion from the Colorado River Basin will be done by January, utility spokeswoman Stacy Chesney said.

The diversion, "is essential to Denver's long-term water supply," Chesney said, adding that it would ensure "environmental benefits" under a cooperative agreement with western slope communities.