

NISP water project backers rally in Fort Lupton

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By Kirk Siegler

Supporters of a controversial water diversion and storage project along the Poudre River in northern Colorado staged a rally yesterday in Fort Lupton, saying the current drought gripping the state is reason to fast track the stalled Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP.

NISP would divert water from the Poudre River northwest of Fort Collins and store it in a pair of new reservoirs.

“This isn’t a Republican or Democrat issue, this is a Colorado issue,” said Fort Lupton Mayor Tom Holton.

The rally under the blistering sun took place at the Fort Lupton Historic site – an adobe replica of a fur-trading post along the South Platte River between Denver and Greeley.

The venue was no coincidence, as speaker after speaker alluded to this region’s early white settlers who had the foresight, they said, to channel and store water off the Rocky Mountains so the high desert could bloom.

But the present also wasn’t lost on Holton, who noted that in the past three wet years, excess water entitled to Colorado has flowed out of the state. Holton wants some of that water to be banked away for years like 2012.

“We need to stop fighting and put these projects together,” he said.

‘Buy and Dry’

As cities like Fort Lupton, and more so nearby Erie and Frederick have grown, they’ve bought up water rights from farmers, leading to the so-called “buy and dry” phenomenon. This has cast doubt about the future economic health of one of this state’s most lucrative industries.

“If we have another year or two like we did this past winter, the cities and farms in our area are going to start to suffer because we don’t have the storage necessary to capture this water that belongs to Colorado,” said Chris Smith, who heads the Left Hand Water district in Boulder and Weld counties.

Saving farms is one of the main arguments put forth by cities and districts like Left Hand backing the estimated \$400 million NISP project. The idea being that if these cities and districts had their own water supplies, they wouldn’t have to buy up all the farmers’ water.

‘Save the Poudre’

But would the buy and dry really stop? Gary Wockner, spokesman for Save the Poudre, is doubtful.

Standing on the river’s banks in downtown Fort Collins, he says NISP is about fueling suburban growth in an arid region that can’t support it.

“There’s a lot of misinformation out there about the role of this proposed reservoir and its impact on farms,” Wockner says.

Lately the Poudre River has been murky because of the Hewlett and High Park fires upstream. But one thing is pretty constant this time of year, says Wockner.

Wildfires or not, drought or wet year, the river flowing through here is a trickle come summer.

“If that reservoir gets built, less than 25% of the natural flow will still flow through this town,” he says. “That’s not shaving, that’s not skimming, that’s gulping, that’s draining.”

Save the Poudre supporters worry more diversions will stress fish, and the local recreation economy.

“There is no water left in our rivers and that’s what we have to come to grips with and find a new path forward,” Wockner says.

Years, not Months

Back in Fort Lupton, Chris Smith of Left Hand says his customers have already implemented aggressive conservation strategies.

“You can’t shut the door after you got here, and you can’t stop population growth,” he says.

Backers of NISP say other proposals floated by environmentalists such as water leasing from farms still won’t meet the region’s long-term needs.

Smith says he’s confident NISP will be built, even after the US Army Corps of Engineers signaled recently it needed another year for an environmental review.

The Corps cited the breadth and impacts of the proposal.

“It’s not a setback, this is a huge project with a lot of implications, and the need to study it is not something that the participants have tried to shy away from or run away from,” Smith says.

NISP is now 13 years in the making. But that’s not necessarily long in water years.

After all, it took more than a quarter century to build the landmark and equally controversial Colorado Big Thompson project, which first diverted and channeled massive amounts of western slope water to the eastern plains.