

Bill in the works could speed up permitting process for new water projects

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By Eric Brown

New water-supply projects could come to fruition much faster if a Colorado congressman has his way in Washington.

Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., is piecing together a bill aimed at speeding up the federal permitting process for new water endeavors, if they are endorsed by the governor of that state.

Many regional water projects have been in the federal permitting stages for years, with participants having spent millions of dollars along the way, and they still have no guarantee the projects will be built.

Brian Werner — a spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which is overseeing efforts to build the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP — said the project has been in its federal permitting phase since 2004, with the 15 participating cities and water districts having already spent about \$12 million. He suspects the process will go on for yet another year.

Gardner said it's taking "way too long."

The details of his bill aren't finalized, but Gardner said it could call for federal agencies to say "yay" or "nay" on a proposed water project within six to nine months after a governor puts his support behind it.

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper has yet to endorse NISP, which would supply its partners with 40,000 acre feet of new water supplies annually, if ever built.

Opponents say water-storage projects like NISP could interfere with river flows and impact wildlife, fisheries, forests and recreational use.

Gardner and others say that — with future water shortages expected for a number of regions — new water-supply projects must get a "yay" or "nay" quicker, so those projects can get built or participants can go back to the drawing board.

Agriculture, the biggest user of water, will suffer the most if these lulls continue, Gardner added.

Participants of large-scale, water-supply projects must work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife and others to make sure all needed wildlife-, habitat- and environmental-protection measures are taken before dirt is moved.

"No doubt; mitigation efforts need to be taken," said Randy Ray, executive director with the Central Colorado Water Conservancy District in Greeley. "But maybe we're having the federal government check too many boxes.

"I'd like to see the federal government have more faith in the state, the local water districts and the engineers who are working on these projects."

Without new water-supply projects in the region, farmers and some water experts worry that growing cities will continue buying up farmland and agricultural water rights in the future to meet their growing needs.

The Colorado-Big Thompson Project, the largest water project in northern Colorado, has seen its water go from 85 percent owned by agricultural users, to now 34 percent owned by agricultural users.

Many farmers have sold rights in times when farming wasn't profitable.

Farmers who need water today now depend on leasing it from the cities who own it.

But in dry times, like this year, cities say they don't have enough water in storage to lease to agriculture.

If Colorado had NISP-like projects in place already, Werner and others say, the above-average snowpacks of recent years would have filled those reservoirs, local cities and farmers would have more water in storage now and they would be in much better shape to endure the ongoing drought.

Instead, during 2009, 2010 and 2011, a total of about 1.4 million acre-feet of water above what's legally required flowed from Colorado into Nebraska, according to Werner.

"Even if we could have captured just some of that in new reservoirs, how much better off would we be right now?" Werner asked.

Colorado's ag industry has a \$40 billion impact on the state, the second-largest contributor to Colorado's economy, behind oil and gas.

But according to the 2010 Statewide Water Initiative Study, the South Platte River basin in northeast Colorado could lose as much as 190,000 acres of irrigated farmland by 2050 due to water shortages.

Farmers and water experts agree that conservation and water-sharing projects could help Colorado meet its growing water needs, but they say new water-storage projects will also be needed.

Ray didn't want to comment specifically on Gardner's bill, but he stressed the need to speed up the federal permitting process for new water projects.

He explained that the Central Water and others have been discussing the Chatfield Reservoir Reallocation Project since the 1980s, but are still working with the federal government to get all permitting in order.

"It needs to change," he said "Because we're not getting anywhere.

"And we really need to get somewhere."