

Lawmaker holds rolling pep rally for Colorado reservoirs

Greenwire – E&E Publishing

September 3, 2013

By Jennifer Yachnin

WINDSOR, Colo. -- Early Friday morning, more than two dozen mayors, city managers and other local officials were caravanning east on County Road 74, staging what amounts to a mobile pep rally for a proposal to build two new reservoirs in northern Colorado.

Over the course of two hours -- and three stops, including here in a field next to a ditch from the Windsor Reservoir -- the event's participants voiced unanimous support for the Northern Integrated Supply Project, a \$490 million plan to supply 40,000 acre-feet of water annually to 15 cities and water districts in Colorado.

"We believe that reducing the push for cities to purchase farmers' water rights by building a collaborative project like the NISP, it helps to address a lot of our water shortfall without having to go after the farm water and to protect a strong agriculture economy in Colorado," said Left Hand Water District Manager Chris Smith.

But the project, which received a scathing U.S. EPA assessment in 2008, remains far from a reality. Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District General Manager Eric Wilkinson told Friday's group that a supplemental environmental impact statement is slated for completion next year with a final version after that.

"Today we're as committed as ever, even after 10 years of being in this process, to see this project through to the end," Smith said, adding that the NISP partners "respect the need for process." But he added: "We know what our project is, we have no idea what the finish line is. We believe a decade or more studying a single project is too long."

The line prompted applause from the group, organized by Colorado Rep. Cory Gardner (R), who likewise lamented that the project has yet to come to fruition.

"A project like NISP has overwhelming support, but it's taken years and years for the federal government to do its part," Gardner said.

Gardner announced at the event that he plans to introduce a measure in Congress next week aimed at speeding the NISP and similar projects along.

The measure would create an Office of Water Storage at the Army Corps of Engineers, which would then become the primary outlet for permitting decisions overseeing the Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. EPA.

Gardner said the new office would not circumvent environmental reviews, like those that have slowed the NISP project, but would require the Army Corps of Engineers to either approve or deny a project within 270 days. If the office failed to act within one year, the project would be deemed automatically approved.

During a stop at a booster pumping station operated by the town of Severance, Erie Mayor Joe Wilson praised Gardner's new legislation while encouraging other local officials to remain enthusiastic about the project.

"Keep writing the emails, keep writing the editorials," Wilson said. But while Friday's group was clearly on board with the project, several officials criticized the "vocal minority" whom they accuse of having helped to stymie their efforts to date.

In particular, criticisms were aimed at Save the Poudre, a group co-founded by Fort Collins resident Gary Wockner, who lives just a few blocks from the river.

"We have federal laws that protect the public's health, protect the environment and protect our rivers, just so that people like Congressman Gardner can't destroy them," said Wockner, who said he had not seen Gardner's proposed legislation but remained skeptical of its intent. "We have been making sure that the Army Corps of Engineers does its job. The Army Corps has to do real science, and real science takes time."