

NISP progressing to environmental statement phase

Fort Morgan Times
December 17, 2013

By Jenni Grubbs

FORT MORGAN — When Fort Morgan residents turn on their faucets or their lawn sprinklers, they expect water to flow out.

And the city has invested heavily in making sure that happens and that it will continue to happen for many decades to come.

The Colorado-Big Thompson water that flows out of residents' faucets now travels through a pipeline from the mountains.

But in less than a decade, it could be flowing here on a different route, from the proposed Galeton Reservoir, which would be built east of Ault and northeast of Greeley.

That is one of two proposed reservoirs that would make up the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP. The massive water storage project would provide space for 3,600 acre feet of water for the 15 participating communities, including Fort Morgan and Morgan County Quality Water District.

"NISP is that water source that we as a community have needed to secure to ensure that we have water supply for our future," Fort Morgan Water Resources/Utilities Director Brent Nation said. "I think overall we're very positive about where the project is headed."

Fort Morgan's stake in NISP is 9 percent, with the city having invested around \$1 million so far. And much more would need to flow from city coffers toward the project before it is all built, according to Nation.

The city has budgeted \$90,000 for that purpose for 2014, and planned water rate increases are likely this year and in 2015 to start preparing for needing to contribute even larger amounts toward the project in coming years, he said.

"That's just kind of where we're at," Nation said. "We need to be prepared for when we're ready for construction."

Right now, the plan calls for preliminary construction activities to start in 2018 and 2019, he said.

And while the costs to the city may seem astronomical, Nation quickly puts the numbers in perspective:

- Each unit of C-BT water that the city buys right now costs \$18,500, a number that keeps rising.
- One C-BT unit is 7/10 of an acre foot of water, and each acre foot is going for \$26,000 currently.
- But because of the city's participation in NISP, the city will have water for about \$12,500 per acre foot.

"We're investing in something that will give us water at \$12,500 an acre foot versus \$26,000 an acre foot," Nation said.

Environmental review

Getting the project built is a complicated process, and the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, aka Northern Water, is working its way through that process, according to Nation.

During the environmental review process, the engineers for Northern Water have been gathering up data for technical reports, which they soon will pass on to the Army Corps of Engineers for the project's updated draft environmental impact statement.

The Corps is the lead federal agency for the Northern Integrated Supply Project's compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, which aims "to help public officials make decisions based on understanding of environmental consequences, and take actions that protect, restore, and enhance the environment," according to a press release from Northern Water.

The process of putting together the environmental impact statement helps the Corps make a final decision ultimately on whether to issue a permit to build NISP.

The environmental impact statement process for NISP started in August 2004, which led to an initial draft being released for public comment in April 2008, according to Northern Water.

In February 2009, the Corps had announced they would move forward with a supplemental draft environmental impact statement "to include additional studies primarily centered around hydrologic and flow modeling," the press release stated.

Also helping with the environmental impact statement process are the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Colorado Department of Transportation, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Larimer County, according to Northern Water.

"These agencies have additional review responsibilities for studies associated with their areas of expertise," the press release stated. "The involvement of these subject matter experts will make the study even more robust and thorough."

With all of the technical reports due to the Corps by Dec. 23, Nation said work on the supplemental draft environmental impact statement could begin "right after the first of the year."

Once the Corps has all the updated technical data, both from the project's supporters and objectors, a draft report is put together and then made public. Then there would be public hearings and comment periods.

"We should be getting the draft environmental impact statement taken care of yet this coming calendar year, possibly by summer 2014," Nation said.

The final environmental impact statement would then be completed in spring 2015 with a final permit decision "due in fall 2016," according to Northern Water.

But just getting further into the environmental impact statement process shows progress, Nation said.

"This is the first step we take in showing the project is really moving forward," he said. "It was really exciting for me."

Latest poll results

While NISP certainly has its detractors, many who are worried about the environmental impact, it also has a sizeable approval rating in polling conducted for Northern Water last summer.

"NISP participants wanted to gauge the public's attitude toward the project since the last poll was conducted in 2008," Northern Water Public Information Officer Brian Werner stated. "The results couldn't be more positive with a 72 percent voter approval for NISP in the survey conducted in July 2013."

He stated that poll results in Morgan County showed 60 percent of respondents supported NISP, and Fort Morgan residents were even more in favor, with 66 percent for it and only 11 percent speaking against it, according to the poll data.

Those numbers were even stronger in Larimer and Weld counties, which had support levels at 68 and 79 percent, respectively.

The poll also showed that 81 percent of respondents thought NISP "should negotiate potential mitigation strategies with the cities and towns along the Poudre River," and 92 percent thought "strategies and projects must be developed to avoid the loss of irrigated agriculture in the state."

Almost 90 percent of those polled "agree that developing a state water plan is a good idea," and 86 percent "believe Colorado should take steps to store water that is legally available to it before it flows out of state."

The poll also showed that 73 percent of respondents felt that 10 years was sufficient time for study, while 84 percent thought the state of Colorado was "correct when it wrote the Army Corps requesting that the study of NISP be finished as soon as possible."

"This poll shows the continued and overwhelming support from the general public for NISP," said Christopher Smith, chairman of the NISP Participants Committee and general manager of the Left Hand Water District. "This project is collaborative, it's innovative, it's efficient and it needs to be built."

Get involved

People seeking to express their opinions about NISP will be able to do so through written public comment and by speaking at public hearings in 2014, according to Northern Water.

Those hearings could start as soon as June 2014. Dates and locations will be announced, as well as information about how to provide comments related to NISP and the draft environmental statement once it is released.

Elected officials, including local, state and federal, will also take comments about NISP.