

Windy Gap, NISP Essential to Water Manager's Future Plans

KUNC

Broadcast on June 4, 2014

By Nathan Heffel

Just west of Carter Lake in the foothills southwest of Loveland sits a rustic abandoned cabin in the middle of a rolling prairie. Soon that cabin, and the entire prairie, could be at the bottom of a lake.

It's the site of the proposed 90,000 acre-foot Chimney Hollow Reservoir. In times of high snow runoff, like right now, it could be part of the answer for water managers looking to store water that is instead just flowing downstream, right out of the state.

Part of Northern Water's Windy Gap Firming Project, the proposed reservoir - if approved and constructed - would provide dedicated water storage for 13 municipal providers. The water would come from Lake Granby on the Western Slope by way of the Colorado Big Thompson Project.

Planning for the project began 25 years ago, and joins another storage project that's also been in the works for decades: The Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP.

"Well, we think NISP is absolutely essential for the future of Northeastern Colorado," said Brian Werner, spokesman for Northern Water.

NISP would divert water from the Poudre River during high flow into the proposed Glade Reservoir northwest of Fort Collins and Galeton Reservoir northeast of Greeley.

"We think it's one of the best things we can do to bring the mix to meet future water supply," Werner said.

That supply will have to serve the more than one million people that are expected to call Northern Colorado home by 2040.

Gary Wockner, director of the Fort Collins-based environmental group Save The Poudre said high flows, like what's happening right now, are essential for the health of the river.

"You see it right now where the river has risen up and flooded into some of the ponds along the river and its rejuvenating wetlands. It's causing cottonwood seeds to sprout, and all sorts of wonderful things are starting to happen," said Wockner. "NISP would drain and destroy the Poudre River and take the water out of the river and send it to a bunch of fast growing sprawling little towns."

Northern Water said concessions have been made for NISP that would regulate how and when water is diverted from the Poudre to keep it at a healthy and environmentally stable level. However Save the Poudre believes the 15 cities towns and water districts advocating for the project could get by

without additional water. They'd just have to double down on conservation efforts, improve their growth management plans, and create water partnerships with area farmers.

"They're going to have to go to plan B eventually. Our intention is to make them go to plan B now, keep the rivers alive for future generations so we can get the best of both worlds," said Wockner.

For Brian Werner, the best of both worlds would be the construction of both Glade and Galeton Reservoirs along with ample conservation, though conservation alone won't suffice.

"As I say, we can't conserve our way to future supply," said Werner. "Yeah that's a piece of it, but it's not the only piece and we're going to need these other things in combination."

Windy Gap Firming Project Manager Jeff Drager said regardless of the need for the Chimney Hollow Reservoir and NISP, both are years away from being realized.

"This type of project, water projects, sometimes take decades to get planned and permitted and constructed. But you just have to be patient and just keep working through it," he said. "We've done a lot of work with people who have had concerns about the project and how it would impact the environment, and we've worked out almost all of those issues if not all of them."

Northern Water projects the Windy Gap Firming Project and Chimney Hollow reservoir should receive final Federal approval before the close of 2014 with construction beginning in 2018 or 2019.

As for NISP, a supplement to an earlier Environmental Impact Study should also be completed by the end of 2014. That will necessitate another year of public meetings and discussions. The entire project is projected to be complete by 2024.