

Clarke: We need to store more water, build NISP

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Opinion by John Clarke

The long-awaited (since 2008) Army Corps of Engineers Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement pertaining to the Northern Integrated Supply Project, proposed by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, finally hit the streets last week. While the entire document and its supporting research eclipses in size the voluminous "War and Peace," I was able to spend some quality time with the 62-page summary. My thoughts:

For starters, there has been speculation the Corps might tie NISP's Glade Reservoir to the proposed expansions of Seaman and Halligan reservoirs. The SDEIS re-affirms those projects will get their own Environmental Impact Statements and not be a part of the NISP EIS.

In addition to gracing our community with a poster showing their bare rear ends as they stood stark naked hand in hand across the Poudre, the Save the Poudre Coalition submitted a "Healthy Rivers Alternative" during the public comment period in 2008. The plan involved a process of rotational fallowing by switching water usage from agricultural to municipal from year to year. According to the SDEIS just issued, "... the rotational fallowing process has not progressed to the point of being considered a proven technology." Therefore the Corps eliminated the "Healthy Rivers Alternative" from detailed analysis.

After the 2008 comment period ended, a group called Western Resource Advocates gave the Corps another alternative, "A Better Future for the Poudre River." This plan called for passive and active conservation to reduce the water requirements of the NISP users and eliminate the need for the project.

The Corps didn't consider the proposal to be viable and declined to pursue the idea.

The SDEIS added a new alternative to those already being studied — the "No Action Alternative." If NISP was not built and the participants acquired additional water to serve their residents from existing agriculture supplies, an estimated 64,200 acres would be dried up and become brown and barren fields. Ugh.

The puzzling part of the SDEIS was the statement that recreational boating through Fort Collins could be reduced from 54 days per year to 33, if NISP is built. That projection seems to be based on the Corps' statement that the Poudre's average flow through Fort Collins in May and June would drop below the flow range of 150 cfs needed to sustain recreational boating. I examined the data supplied by the charts and graphs in the SDEIS summary. Those data provide median, not average flows. NISP estimates, according to the website, show the average 150 cfs would be maintained.

The SDEIS says, "The District (NISP) will submit to the Corps a proposed final Mitigation Plan " It seems that requirement will be well received by the NISP officials. According to Project Manager Carl Brouer, "We are extremely interested in working with Fort Collins to mitigate issues, solve problems and make the river better."

Fact: NISP can only take water from the river during wet years; nothing can be taken during dry years. This year (a very wet year) will see an estimated 1 million acre feet of water flow out of Colorado. If NISP were already in place, it would be full. It's simple — we need to store more water. Conserve water! Build NISP!

John Clarke is a former Larimer County commissioner, former Fort Collins City Council member and photographer in Fort Collins for 45 years.

