Colorado must store water; NISP is the way to do it

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Opinion by Carl Brady

Few would disagree that we have a water scarcity problem in our area, but many may not appreciate the seriousness of it. The root cause, of course, is paucity of precipitation. This is exacerbated by continuing population growth. As in much of the West, precipitation in Colorado averages only about 15 inches per year, while Midwest and Eastern states average 30 to 50 inches or more. The extent of the problem and possible plans to address it can be found at coloradowaterplan.com for the state and at www.southplattebasin.com for our area specifically.

Additional emphasis on conservation and reuse can help mitigate the problem but alone will fall far short of solving it. Agricultural transfers can meet some of the shortfall, but avoidance of the current oft used "buy and dry" approach needs to be encouraged. There is little doubt that additional transmountain diversions will be required since 80 percent of the state's water resources are concentrated on the west side of the Continental Divide, where fewer than 20 percent of the people reside.

Such diversions are complicated not only by cost and engineering difficulty but also by prior claims on the water by surrounding states. Such claims are set out in a number of interstate compacts affecting Colorado's borders on all sides. Rio Grande and Colorado river flows are even affected by international agreements with Mexico.

However, while these agreements can cause difficulties, at present, we are not even utilizing all of the river flows available to us, especially in wet years. To do so requires more storage capability through the enlargement of existing reservoirs or by building new ones. Several projects have been identified with this in mind and are working their way through the permitting process.

One such project whose near term implementation is especially critical to a number of communities in our area, including all those in the Carbon Valley, is the Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP). The NISP is a well thought out project that includes the building of two additional storage reservoirs to make available 40,000 acre feet, enough for about 100,000 families, of new reliable water supplies. It will not affect normal river water flows but will store excess water that currently leaves the state in years of abundance. More information about NISP can be found at www.northernwater.org under proposed projects.

Projects such as the NISP must go through a myriad of federal, state and local permitting processes. The formal federal environmental permitting process for the NISP began in the spring of 2004 with the Army Corps of Engineers as the lead federal agency. A draft Environmental Impact Statement for the project was released in April 2008. In February 2009, the Corps announced a supplemental Environmental Impact Statement including additional studies would be required. Although this supplemental statement was anticipated to be available in 2010, it still has not been completed. It is now expected that a draft will be released in about June

of this year. There will be a public hearing and comment period after its release, and it is essential that local residents express the need and their support for this critical project.

When the NISP was first proposed, it was expected to be complete by about 2013. Now that the permitting process has stretched out for over a decade, completion is unlikely before about 2023 at the earliest. Since all available water to these communities, primarily from the Colorado-Big Thompson transmountain diversion project built in the 1940s, is fully committed and population growth is continuing, further delay of this project will be devastating. Many communities, either alone or in consort, will be forced to purchase additional agricultural water rights, resulting in the further drying up of valuable farmland. This should not be allowed to occur.

Carl Brady is a retired engineer who has been a resident of Fredrick about 10 years.