

# Cory Gardner rallies farmers for massive water-storage project

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Colorado faces a looming shortage of billions of gallons of water in the next 35 years. One project in the works hopes to be part of the solution, but it will face big challenges in the next month from environmental groups that believe it will drain dry the Poudre River near Fort Collins.

A rally for the Northern Integrated Supply Project Thursday celebrated a recent milestone – the completion of a supplemental draft Environmental Impact Statement – and encouraged supporters to pack Army Corps of Engineers hearings in Fort Collins and Greeley on July 22 and 23, respectively.

U.S. Senator Cory Gardner, R-Colo., laid out the consequences if the water project isn't built.

The state faces a shortage of 600,000 to 1 million acre-feet of water by 2050, mostly for municipal and industrial users, Gardner said. Even if every water project on the books is built, the state would still be short at least 100,000 acre-feet of water. And if these projects aren't built, he added, it means more "buy and dry" of prime farmland on the Eastern Plains, possibly up to 700,000 acres. That's about a \$500 million annual impact for agriculture, he said.

"The longer we wait, the higher the cost, the more acres get dried up." People will be out of work and communities will suffer, Gardner stated. "We can do better."

The project would divert water from the Poudre River into a new reservoir northwest of Fort Collins. Glade Reservoir could hold up to 170,000 acre-feet of water. A second reservoir, Galetton, which would be built northeast of Greeley, would hold about 45,000 acre-feet of water. An acre-foot of water is the amount of water to cover one acre of land by one foot. That's roughly 325,853 gallons of water.

The Army Corps of Engineers will allow public comment on the environmental impact statement for a 75-day period, ending on September 3. The Corps is involved because the Northern Integrated Supply Project impacts federal water and wetlands and the project needs the Corps' approval under the Clean Water Act.

Eric Wilkerson of Northern Water, the project's chief proponent, told The Colorado Independent that the Northern Integrated Supply Project could break ground in as little as two to three years.

The project has drawn strong opposition from environmental groups that fear it will reduce the river flow on the Poudre, hurt fish and other aquatic habitats and result in polluted waters.

Wilkerson told the 175 people in attendance that the project will be done in the most environmentally-conscious manner possible. Proponents promise to supply 3,600 acre-feet of water in the winter and late summer months to maintain minimum flows in the Poudre, and put money into restoring streams and improving aquatic habitats.

Had the reservoirs been in place this year, Wilkerson said, the May rains would have filled them with about 130,000 acre-feet of water. Instead, that water flowed to Nebraska, exceeding what is required by interstate

agreements. These interstate agreements, known as compacts, dictate how much water must flow from Colorado's rivers to surrounding states, including Nebraska and Kansas.

The cost to build the reservoirs, estimated at \$500 million, will be paid for by the 11 northern Front Range communities and four water districts supporting the project. They've already spent \$9 million on the supplemental draft environmental impact statement and another \$15 million on a first environmental impact statement and other studies.

"We have to quit being quiet in the water community" about the Northern Integrated Supply Project, Wilkerson told the audience. "We need to be vocal in order to move this project forward!"

Congressman Ken Buck, R-Colo., also addressed the rally. Buck pointed out that the current generation is living on infrastructure "that our grandparents built for us. It's time we built infrastructure for our children and grandchildren."

Several members of the Colorado General Assembly also attended, including Sen. Mary Hodge, D-Brighton; Sen. Jerry Sonnenberg, R-Sterling; Sen. Kevin Lundberg, R-Berthoud; and Sen. John Cooke, R-Greeley.

Sonnenberg said he's watched the South Platte River for the last several months, watching the water go to Nebraska. "That's **our** water," he exclaimed.

Referring to the controversial rain-barrel bill that he opposed in the last legislative session, he said the "ultimate rain-barrel is ready to be built and that's NISP."

One of the problems faced by water-storage projects is the amount of time it takes from conception to completion. The Animas-La Plata project in southwestern Colorado was authorized by President John Kennedy in 1962. The reservoir filled to capacity for the first time just a few years ago. Similarly, a project at Chatfield Reservoir to add storage capacity was given its final approvals in the past year, more than a decade after originally authorized.

Those delays are sometimes attributed to foot-dragging by the federal government, particularly when there is strong opposition.

Gardner told The Independent that Congress must play a role in oversight over "bureaucrats who would rather delay" these projects than move them forward. Federal permits are responsible for some of the delays and that process could be reformed, he explained. The current process also allows every voice to be heard, and that's important, he added, but "at the end of the day the right thing has to be done."

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Gary Wockner of Save the Poudre told The Independent the solution for Colorado's water shortage is to focus on conservation and efficiency and work pro-actively with farmers.

"Farmers are the key to the future of Colorado's growth problem," Wockner said Thursday. He pointed out that farmers already take 85 percent of the river's water. Other options should be explored, such as rotational fallowing, where certain portions of farmers' fields are left unplanted from year to year. Cities and farmers should work together, Wockner added.

As to the supplemental draft environmental impact statement from the Army Corps of Engineers, Wockner said it has major “fatal flaws. It completely dismisses conservation and efficiency as an option for the cities, miscalculates the impact on the Poudre River, and it fails to correctly analyze the impacts to recreational economy and the community of Fort Collins.”

This project will make the river dramatically worse, he said, and the mitigation promised by the project’s 15 partners is an unenforceable farce.

“It would turn the Poudre River in Fort Collins into a muddy, stinking ditch,” he said.