

Editorial: Conservation is needed — so is NISP

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Northern Water hopes construction of its Northern Integrated Supply Project will begin by 2019 and be complete by 2021. But opponents of NISP have one goal: Make sure that the project and its component reservoirs are not built.

Save the Poudre is concerned that the diversion of water from the Cache la Poudre River to fill the 170,000-acre-foot Glade Reservoir will adversely affect the health of the river, animal and plant species that rely on it, and the quality of Fort Collins' drinking water supply.

Save the Poudre says northern Front Range communities can save the same amount of water through conservation and better water management.

Northern Colorado needs both.

Doing nothing will maintain the status quo, which is to continue to allow Colorado water to leave the state in wet years while struggling to meet demand in dry years.

The draft report to the governor by the Colorado Water Conservation Board noted that the state will face a 500,000-acre-foot shortage by 2050. Projects such as NISP, which includes Glade and the 40,000-acre-foot Galeton Reservoir, will be necessary if the state's water needs are to be met.

If Colorado is to meet its growing water demands, it must make the right compromises between diversion, storage and environmental needs, and NISP is the right kind of compromise at the right time.

NISP will be designed to use an existing canal to pull water out of the Poudre during peak seasonal flows and at times of significant rainfall, to minimize the effect on the river and its ecosystem. The water would be stored northwest of Fort Collins in a reservoir built using existing geologic features, similar to Horsetooth Reservoir.

While building and filling the reservoir will mean lower river flows during peak months and the loss of about 44 acres of wetlands, not building a reservoir would mean the loss of 69,200 acres of irrigated farmland and the accelerated shift of agricultural water to municipal and industrial uses, according to an Army Corps of Engineers environmental impact statement. Further, keeping the status quo would lead to the loss of up to 1,384 acres of wetlands, according to the Corps of Engineers.

Save the Poudre is right to call for conservation. Municipalities should pursue ways to encourage conservation, such as tiered rate structures. Communities should encourage landscaping that uses less water and low-usage appliances.

But this water-rich state must store the water it owns.

Currently, Front Range communities benefit from the foresight of leaders who decades ago planned and built water storage systems and reservoirs. The current generation should do the same by building reasonable projects such as NISP.