

'Govt Dinosaur Project' Or Growth Necessity? NISP Debate Continues

KUNC

July 23, 2015

By Stephanie Paige Ogburn



A large crowd gathered in Fort Collins Wednesday night to offer comments on the Northern Integrated Supply Project.

More than 400 people filled a room at the Fort Collins Hilton Wednesday night. They were waiting to speak their mind about a proposal to build two new reservoirs in Northern Colorado -- a project called the Northern Integrated Supply Project.

Their purpose is to provide water -- about 40,000 acre-feet -- to smaller Front Range communities, towns like Fort Morgan and Frederick, who lack water to supply their fast growing populations.

The water for Glade Reservoir, which at 170,000 acre-feet would be a bit larger than Horsetooth, would come from the Poudre River. Because of this, it has many [opponents](#).

"We're saying, let's just build another dam, that will solve our problems. No, it will create problems," said one commenter.

"The dam philosophy is going backwards in time. We see efforts to remove dams rather than build more dams," added another.

Others called it a "government dinosaur project," pointing to the drying up of Lake Mead, on the lower Colorado River, as a cautionary tale. Still more suggested towns in need of water could do more to conserve.

But Army Corps project manager John Urbanic said the recent [environmental analysis](#) did consider a scenario where cities conserved more water. Even then, there's not enough water to go around.

"It does kind show that even with a very aggressive conservation strategy you would still end up with a need that you need to meet," Urbanic said.

Of course, that need could be met by taking water from irrigated farmland. In fact, if the Northern Integrated Supply Project is not approved, the cities involved might do just that.

According to the draft environmental impact statement, they would build a reservoir near Windsor, called Cactus Hill, and buy up water from 64,000 acre-feet of farmland. That's about a 10-square mile area of farmland that would leave production, said Carl Brouwer, the project manager for Northern Water Conservancy District, which is spearheading NISP.

Even with the project, growing cities would still need more even more water, acknowledged the Corps' Urbanic.

"In reality, the NISP project only fulfills a portion of that need, it doesn't meet all of that need," he said.

But building the reservoirs would give them crucial water supplies, according to the towns involved. Amy Schiers, a town trustee for Frederick, which will use NISP water, said "water is not a choice. We need it to survive."

With two consecutive drought years, Frederick would begin running out of water, said Schiers. The town takes conservation seriously too, she said. Its per capita use is down to 140 gallons per capita, which is good compared to other towns nearby, and Frederick has a goal of conserving an additional 18 percent. (For comparison, water use in Denver, a more urban setting with aggressive conservation measures, is around 80 gallons per capita per day. Fort Collins average per capita use is 153 gallons per capita per day.)

It isn't just those getting water from the project that support it. Carlyle Currier, vice president with the Colorado Farm Bureau, said he and the bureau support the project because it "will provide northern Front Range communities with an alternate source of water without transferring water away from agricultural uses, ensuring the agricultural industry in northern Colorado will remain strong."

State senator Jerry Sonnenberg also spoke in favor of the project. He said in wet years, the reservoirs would provide much needed storage.

"This spring, for 2 months, roughly 20,000 acre-feet per day flowed out of this state. That amounts to somewhere near 1.25 million acre-feet of water that could have been stored," Sonnenberg said.

Before that water can be stored, though, the Northern Integrated Supply Project needs to get built. That may still be a while.

Public comment on the draft supplemental environmental impact statement is open until Sept. 3, 2015. After that, the Corps will address these comments in a Final Environmental Impact Statement. The Corps' Urbanic said that would likely be released in about a year.

Following that, the Corps typically takes a few more months to issue a final decision on a permit. Of course, they can always be sued as well, no matter which way they decide, Urbanic said.