

Mayor: Get Behind NISP

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Opinion by Terry L. McAlister, Mayor, Fort Morgan

An important piece of Fort Morgan's future is at a critical point right now, and local residents can play a part in helping to ensure that this vital project crosses the finish line.

The public comment period for the Northern Integrated Supply Project is open right now, and continues through Sept. 3. I encourage all city residents and those in the surrounding area to submit comments in favor of approval for this long-needed project.

We've all heard about NISP for what seems like years. That's because it has been in the works for years, winding its way through a very complicated federal approval and permitting process. But the project now appears to be in the home stretch, and officials at Northern Water, which is spearheading the project, say there is finally some light at the end of the tunnel.

So what exactly is NISP? It is a project that will create two new reservoirs, one north of Fort Collins and the other northeast of Greeley, to capture and store excess water that has been sent down the South Platte River for decades, where it crosses the Nebraska border and is lost forever to Colorado water users who desperately need it.

We are all well aware of how much water has passed through Fort Morgan in recent years, with the 2013 flood and our very wet spring this year just two examples of times when a water storage system would have been a real asset. That's why the City of Fort Morgan and 14 other cities, towns and water districts have been trying for years to get NISP built.

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There is opposition to NISP, mostly from people who fear the project will dry up the Poudre River. But we are assured by Northern Water that is not the case. Storing water in wet years to use in dry years is the only way to ensure a reliable water supply for the future, for both domestic and agricultural uses. Northern says NISP will help stop the drying up of agricultural land.

NISP will cost a lot to build, and the cost will only rise the longer it takes to get approval for the project. Indeed, the cost to the City of Fort Morgan alone is likely to be in the neighborhood of \$50 million. But remember, there was some opposition and worry about cost many years ago when the City of Fort Morgan decided to invest in the Colorado-Big Thompson water project. And I can tell you firsthand that there are many cities and towns that now wish they had been wise enough to make that investment.

Fort Morgan now enjoys a steady supply of high-quality C-BT water. NISP presents us with a similar opportunity now to make a foresighted decision that will help ensure a reliable supply of water for the future. As many people in Colorado will attest, water is the lifeblood of economic prosperity and security, and NISP is our key to a stable supply of this precious resource.

The Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement for NISP was released in June, and copies can be found at the Fort Morgan Public Library. You can also look at the SDEIS online at <http://www.nwo.usace.army.mil/Missions/RegulatoryProgram/Colorado/EISNISP>. Fair warning: it's a lot of material, and just another example of how exhaustively this project has been studied and researched.

Public hearings on the NISP SDEIS will be held on July 22 and 23, in Fort Collins and Greeley, and anyone is welcome to attend those hearings and express their support - or opposition - to the project. Details about the times and locations of the hearings can be found under News & Announcements on the home page of city's website (<http://www.cityoffortmorgan.com/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=1068>).

Written comments are also being accepted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers until Sept. 3. Comments can be e-mailed to nisp.eis@usace.army.mil.

Public support will play a key role in pushing NISP through the approval process, and we'll need your help. On behalf of the City of Fort Morgan and the rest of the City Council, I urge everyone to get involved and make your voices heard during this critical comment period for NISP.

Terry McAlister is the mayor of Fort Morgan. He can be reached at mayor@cityoffortmorgan.com.