

NISP supporters hold rally before public hearing

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By Catherine Sweeney

After more than a decade, droves of water project supporters are gearing up for what could be the fight's dusk.

Proponents of the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP, held a rally in Berthoud on Thursday afternoon. An array of Colorado politicians — from mayors to U.S. senators — pumped attendees up for an Army Corps of Engineering public hearing this month.

Planners have spent 12 years in the corps' permit process for NISP, which aims to increase northern Colorado's water supply by diverting water from the Poudre River and storing it in new reservoirs in Fort Collins and northern Weld County.

Two weeks ago, the Army Corps of Engineers [released a report](#) detailing the environmental impacts of the project. It took them six years to put it together. Supporters hailed the report, calling it a milestone on the path to approval.

With the report comes a public input period, which was recently extended to Sept. 3. The corps has scheduled two public meetings.

At the rally, the speakers' message was clear: Get to the meetings and speak up.

They urged supporters to consider the damage of the plan's failure, which could include severe water shortages and excessive damage to the agriculture industry.

U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner, who serves on the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, focused on the harm "buy and dry" deals could do to Colorado.

In these transactions, farm owners lease out their water rights to cities and municipalities. Water can't be in two places at once; the deals kill crops.

Many Colorado municipalities already lease water from farms. If the NISP project falls through, Colorado will depend more heavily on farm water.

As the state grows, its water needs do, too. Gardner predicted the state would need to lease 500,000 to 700,000 acres of farmland to keep up. Damages depend on the crop and its price, but the cost would be in the millions.

"That's economic devastation," he said. "The longer we delay ... the higher the cost."

Weld County Commissioners Barbara Kirkmeyer and Mike Freeman both attended the rally and expressed their support.

"It's very important to me," Freeman said. "We know the cost of buy-and-dry."

Freeman represents Weld County's District 1, which covers the northern half of the county. It also covers a vast

amount of farmland, which would be considered for water lease deals.

All of the speakers gave supporters mandates, but U.S. Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colo., made his especially clear.

“Everyone in this tent, every one of your friends ... everyone has got to get to those hearings,” Buck directed.

But NISP supporters won’t be the only ones there.

“We will absolutely be going to the meetings,” said Gary Wockner, an environmental activist who heads a Fort Collins group called Save the Poudre.

Opponents argue the project would drain and destroy the river, along with the habitats surrounding it and the recreation industry that depends on it.

“We’re going to do everything we can to fight this project and stop it, for as long as it takes,” he said. “We’ve been fighting it for 10 years, we’re going to fighting it for 10 more.”

What’s next

Residents interested in commenting on the supplemental draft of the Northern Integrated Water Supply environmental impact statement should do so prior to Sept. 3. There are two public hearings in which to do so:

» 5 p.m. July 22 at the Hilton Fort Collins, 425 W. Prospect Road, Fort Collins

» 5 p.m. July 23 at the Weld County Administration Building, 1150 O St., Greeley.

To view the supplemental draft environment statement, and to learn where to send written comments, go to the Army Corps of Engineers’ [website](#).

Submit comments in writing to John Urbanic, NISP EIS Project Manager, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District, Denver Regulatory Office, 9307 S. Wadsworth Blvd., Littleton, CO 80128 E-mail: nisp.eis@usace.army.mil