

NISP water project hearing draws support at Greeley hearing

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By Catherine Sweeney

A Northern Colorado water project had its second public hearing in Greeley on Thursday night, and speakers were overwhelmingly in favor.

About 150 people attended the meeting for the Northern Integrated Supply Project, which aims to cure the region's water woes by diverting from the Cache la Poudre River via pipeline into two newly constructed reservoirs.

The Army Corps of Engineers held the meeting. The agency is acting as the project's federal supervisor, making sure it is in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, and it will ultimately decide whether the plan will come to fruition.

More than 30 people offered to speak, and less than a handful voiced opposition to the project. Those who spoke in favor — which included local farmers, government officials speaking on behalf of their constituents, water policy experts and environmentalists — were passionate. Some were angry, others on the verge of tears.

The project, which has been in the planning process for 12 years, had its first public meeting in Greeley seven years ago. The Corps had released its first report on the project's potential environmental impacts. Participants in that meeting and a similar one in Fort Collins raised enough concerns to prompt the Corps to conduct a second report. It was published this year.

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In 2008, the Greeley meeting's speakers were predominantly in favor of the project, according to Tribune reports from the time.

Fort Collins' speakers were staunchly opposed, said Weld County Commissioner Sean Conway. This time, he said, it was 60-40 in support.

The commissioner chalked it up to two changes since 2008: the Corps' second environmental report and natural events that have transpired since the last meeting.

He said the second report calmed some fears residents might have had. But more importantly, since 2008, Colorado faced one of the worst droughts in its history, as well as some of the worst floods.

It made people realize the need for a water system like NISP, he said.

The region's most vocal anti-NISP organization, Save the Poudre, had a lackluster presence at the meeting. Spokesman Gary Wockner didn't take the stand and couldn't be reached for comment afterward.

Proponents voiced their support for a variety of reasons; fear for future generations' water needs, the damage of "buy and dry" deals, and the effect of population growth. Opponents were inspired by environmental concerns and lifelong love for the Poudre River.

Josh Cook, a speaker who said he has worked for several water districts, approached the stand with a shaking voice.

"I don't know what we'll do without NISP," he said. "I don't know where my children are going to get food. I don't know where farmers are going to get water."

There is already a water shortage in Colorado, said Conway said in his speech. He was speaking on behalf of the South Platte Roundtable.

The current water gap is estimated at 190,000 to 630,000 acre-feet across Colorado, he said.

The gap illustrates the difference between how much water the state needs and how much is available. One acre-foot is 325,851 gallons.

NISP is projected to add 40,000 acre-feet to the region's water supply.

One solution Coloradans have used to cure water shortages is "buy and dry" deals. Here, municipalities and water districts lease land from farmers to use their water.

These arrangements render farmland useless.

U.S. Congressman Ken Buck's area representative, Wes McElhinny, was one of the many who raised population growth concerns.

"The population has doubled since 1970, but our storage abilities have barely increased," McElhinny said.

The region is one of the fastest-growing in the nation, and the discrepancy is only going to get worse.

One of the opponents was Gina Jannet, a Fort Collins resident and Save the Poudre member. She raised water quality concerns. Namely, reducing the amount of water in the river could lead to a higher concentration of pollutants.

"What may appear to be modest changes to water quality... can have significant impacts on the bottom line of Fort Collins," she said.

This was the last open meeting the Corps has scheduled, but the public input period, during which people can write in to the agency, lasts until September 3rd.

The Corps will take about a year to analyze all of that input and public the final environmental impact report, said John Urbanic, a project manager for the Corps. It'll be another year until a final decision is made.

"We're feeling confident," said Brian Werner, a spokesman for Northern Water, which is overlooking the project.