

# Northern Colorado leaders rally for NISP water: "Get it Done"

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By Bruce Finley

BERTHOUD — Northern Colorado leaders rallied Thursday urging quicker green lights for their "ultimate rain barrel" — a \$713 million project that would divert water from the federally protected Cache La Poudre River and store 71 billion gallons in two new reservoirs.

They contend this Northern Integrated Supply Project is crucial for 400,000 future Front Range residents in some of the nation's fastest-growing areas around Colorado's oil and gas boom.

Since April, so much rain filled existing reservoirs and flowed into the South Platte River that Nebraska got 1.3 million acre-feet that Colorado could have caught if it had more storage space such as NISP's Glade and Galeton reservoirs, Northern Water manager Eric Wilkinson said Thursday. Northern Water has been seeking permits since 2004 and still faces federal and state regulatory hurdles.

Erie, Fort Morgan, Windsor, Firestone, Frederick, Dacono and others "are trying to meet their future water needs," Wilkinson said.

Poudre water wouldn't be taken during dry times, ensuring flows of at least 50 cubic feet per second during summer and 25 cfs in winter. Mitigation of harm to wetlands would lead to restoration of habitat elsewhere, he said.

"NISP will not dry up the Poudre River," Wilkinson said. "This project makes beneficial use of available water supplies."

Gov. John Hickenlooper's administration must complete environmental reviews; a state spokeswoman said Hickenlooper and two key water officials were traveling and couldn't respond to queries. Federal water engineers at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers this week [extended by 30 days a public-comment period](#) on the latest environment impact document, due to be done next year.

Construction couldn't begin before 2019, Northern Water officials said, assuming permits are issued.

Anti-NISP activist Gary Wockner said he doubts that will happen and raised the prospect of court challenges.

"The thresholds they propose are not enough water and would turn the Poudre into a muddy, stinking ditch through Fort Collins," Wockner said.

The alternative to developing new water supplies would be for booming cities and industry to buy more

water from farmers, leading to a dry-up of 100 square miles of irrigated agriculture, project proponents said. That would mean a \$400 million loss of agricultural output, U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner said at the rally.

"That is economic devastation," Gardner said. "We can't keep pushing it down the road. The longer this takes, the higher the cost, and the more acres that get dried up."

This spring, water flows in the Poudre, a South Platte tributary with upper reaches protected as wild and scenic, were sufficient for Northern Water to trap and store 130,000 acre-feet in the two proposed reservoirs, officials said. The project goal is to store enough water to supply 40,000 acre-feet a year to 15 participating water providers.

Gardner said he'll work to accelerate permitting in Washington, D.C.

"We need to store more water," he said in an interview. "Let's find every available hour that someone can work and put it to work on this project."

More than 150 state lawmakers, mayors, county commissioners, water providers and residents attended Thursday's rally.

"We've got to find a way to keep Colorado's water in Colorado," state Sen. Jerry Sonnenberg said. "We'll have the ultimate rain barrel, ready to be filled, right up the road here."

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