

Opinion: The Front Range needs NISP

Times-Call

June 23, 2015

By Carl Brady

The Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Study (SDEIS) for the Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP) was released as scheduled on June 19. As I have noted in recent guest opinions, the NISP is especially critical to many in our area. Participants in the project include the municipalities of Dacono, Eaton, Erie, Evans, Firestone, Fort Lupton, Fort Morgan, Frederick, Lafayette, Windsor and Severance, as well as the water districts of Central Weld County, Fort Collins-Loveland, Left Hand and Morgan County.

The NISP is a well advised project that includes the building of two additional storage reservoirs to make available 40,000 acre feet, enough for about 100,000 families, of new reliable water supplies. It will not affect normal river water flows but will store excess water that currently leaves the area in times of abundance such as we have experienced recently.

More information about the NISP can be found at www.northernwater.org under proposed projects. The SDEIS can also be rather easily found at www.nwo.usace.army.mil. The SDEIS is only the latest step in the formal federal environmental permitting process for the NISP, which began in the spring of 2004 with the Army Corps of Engineers as the lead federal agency. A draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project was released in April 2008 but, in February 2009, the Corps announced an SDEIS would be required.

The NISP SDEIS is considered one of the most extensive and intensive reviews of a water project ever undertaken in Colorado and includes a proposed mitigation plan illustrating how NISP participants will provide additional water to the Poudre River during low flows and implement river restoration measures.

When the NISP was first proposed, it was expected to be in service by about 2013. Now that the permitting process has stretched out for so long, it is unlikely to be in operation by about 2023 at the earliest. Since all available water to these communities, primarily from the Colorado-Big Thompson transmountain diversion project built in the 1940s, is committed and population growth is continuing, further delay of this project is likely to be quite damaging. The SDEIS makes this clear in its discussion of the need for the project. It notes that all of the NISP participants have ongoing water conservation programs to discourage unnecessary use of water. Through such efforts, all have made significant reductions in water use over the past 10 to 20 years yet current demand is already beginning to exceed availability for many of them. Even with no further delay in the permitting process, it is probable that many communities will be forced to institute draconian water restriction measures and/or force the "drying up" of more farmland to meet water needs before the NISP water becomes available.

Public open houses and hearings for oral/written comments on the SDEIS will be held July 22 at the Hilton Fort Collins, 425 W. Prospect Road, in Fort Collins; and July 23 at the Weld County Administration Building, 1150 O Street, Greeley. Open Houses will be from 5 to 6 p.m., and hearings will begin at 6 p.m.

Area residents need to be aware that the NISP faces opposition that can be expected to try to pack these hearings with negativism. This opposition has been the primary reason that the permitting process has been extended for so long. The opposition is largely emotional, with no real alternative to the NISP being offered, only increased conservation. And, while increased conservation is important and should be pursued, the SDEIS makes clear it will not solve the water scarcity problem of our area by itself. It is therefore absolutely essential that as many area residents as possible attend these hearings to express the need and their support for this critical project.

Carl Brady is a retired engineer who has been a resident of Fredrick about 10 years.