

Despite setback, water officials believe northern Colorado storage project will face no timeline changes

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One of the region's largest water projects is hitting a snag, but leaders say that won't affect the schedule.

More than a dozen entities across Colorado are working on the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP. The goal is to divert water out of the Poudre and South Platte rivers into two new reservoirs — Glade, to serve thirsty towns along the Front Range, and Galeton, to serve irrigation ditch companies and ultimately farmers.

Leaders have been working on NISP for more than a decade, and that's made land management difficult.

Galeton was slated to go east of Ault and south of Colo. 14, but during the lengthy permitting process, a landowner in the area ended up leasing to Noble Energy.

Now there are 24 active wells on the site.

"You can't fault the landowner, if somebody's going to come in and offer (them) money," said Brian Werner, a spokesman for Northern Water Conservancy District, which acts as the project's lead agency.

Now the organization has to decide: mitigate or move.

"It can get mitigated," Werner said. "We can cap those wells."

But it will be expensive and difficult. In some areas moving might be the more difficult choice, but it's looking as though that isn't the case for the Galeton reservoir.

"(There's) a very similar site across (Colorado) Highway 14 to the north," Werner said. "And it doesn't have 24 oil and gas wells in the footprint."

It doesn't have any.

Werner doesn't think history will repeat itself.

"We're at a point where we talked to the landowners," he said. "I think we can avoid that same scenario this time around."

The hang-up is understandable, Weld County Commissioner Sean Conway said.

"I think the important thing to remember is this site (decision happened) long before the oil and gas explosion in Weld County," he said.

He said he's even less concerned because Galeton is not only supposed to be smaller than its Glade counterpart, but also because it's scheduled to be built second.

"They have plenty of time," he said. "It's not like there's an immediacy here."

[About 150 people attended Greeley's most recent public hearing](#) for the project last July. More than 30 people offered to speak, and less than a handful voiced opposition to the project.

The Environmental Protection Agency [sent a letter to the Army Corps of Engineers criticizing its environmental studies last year](#). EPA officials said the Army Corps of Engineers' studies don't delve deeply enough into the environmental risks NISP poses.

Supporters [at all levels of government](#) — from Colorado's U.S. senators to Weld County commissioners — have pushed for the project.

For all intents and purposes, despite the setback, the project will be essentially the same.

"It can store the same amount of water, using the same water right, and do what it was intended to do," Werner said. "This shouldn't change the timeline or anything."

Today, it's looking as though the federal permitting process will end in 2018. The Army Corps of Engineers still has to finish its third [environmental study](#), which is due out sometime in 2017, Werner said. There will be a public comment period after that, and about a year later, the record of decision should come.