

EPA wants further review of water-diversion project to protect Colorado River

Federal authorities say a long-planned project to divert more western Colorado water to growing Front Range suburbs may cause "significant degradation" of already deteriorating ecosystems along the upper Colorado River.

An Environmental Protection Agency review of data used in planning the project found mathematical errors and a downplaying of "critical adverse impacts" from the \$270 million project, which Colorado leaders consider crucial for millions of residents.

EPA reviewers cited a separate 2011 state study that documented the disappearance of all native sculpin fish and 38 percent of aquatic insect species over 20 years as a result of existing water diversions.

An EPA document, sent to federal permitting authorities last week, recommends further analysis of the Northern Water Conservancy District's Windy Gap FIRMing Project to prevent new violations of state water-quality standards and "a more robust monitoring and mitigation plan" to protect the river.

"The EPA has not recommended delaying this project," EPA regional administrator Jim Martin said. "Our recommendations are intended to provide a path forward that also protects the Colorado River."

But Gov. John Hickenlooper contends the current project plan "comprehensively addresses impacts to Colorado's fish and wildlife." This week, state officials stood by that position.

Colorado Department of Natural Resources executive director Mike King discussed the diversion recently with U.S. Department of the Interior Assistant Secretary Anne Castle.

This week, he was unavailable to comment. His spokesman said the state believes the current plan "strikes the difficult balance" of supplying more water to Front Range cities while protecting the river.

67 percent of natural flows

The project would pull an extra 21,296 acre-feet of water a year from the Colorado River near Granby and pump it through an existing 9-foot-diameter tunnel under the Continental Divide — to be stored in a proposed 90,000 acre-foot Chimney Hollow Reservoir southwest of Loveland.

This would increase the amount of water Northern diverts annually to more than 250,000 acre-feet and bring the total water diverted from the upper Colorado to 67 percent of natural flows.

Northern's diverted water sustains 33 cities and towns and irrigates 650,000 acres of crops. An acre-foot typically is enough to sustain two families of four for a year.

If the Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approve the project, construction could begin by late 2014.

Federal officials "are considering those (EPA) comments," said Bureau of Reclamation spokeswoman Kara Lamb. "If any of those comments include significant new information relevant to the analysis, they'll be addressed."

She said a decision could be made any day.

Environmental harm along the upper Colorado River began in the 1930s, when federal agencies began pumping water flowing west back east, through the Adams, Moffat and other tunnels under the Continental Divide to quench the semi-arid Front Range. Algae has spread. Water temperatures have increased. Sediment is clogging river channels and choking aquatic life.

Denver Water, too, is proposing to divert more Western Slope water out of the Colorado River basin — about 10,000 acre-feet a year through the Moffat tunnel to an expanded Gross Reservoir southwest of Boulder.

May boost bypass proposal

Conservation groups say the EPA review backs what they have been saying for years.

They are hoping the report will bolster their push for a bypass around Windy Gap Reservoir, which has broken the flow of the river. They also want to make sure at least 2,400 acre-feet of water — or 1,200 cubic feet per second — is released every other year to clear sediment. The state's own study found such flushing flows are essential. But the Northern Water Conservancy District has agreed to devote only about half that much water to ensure ecosystem health.

"This project could be done in a way where the Front Range gets its water and the river is protected. But to do that, we need more mitigation and monitoring. You have to make sure you have enough high flows," said Trout Unlimited attorney Mely Whiting. "Our hope is to have folks see the light on this and come to an agreement. Litigation is an option."

The National Wildlife Federation supports "any mitigation measures that will increase flushing flows adequately," regional representative John Gale said. Otherwise, "the proposed firming projects at Windy Gap and the Moffat Tunnel are only going to exacerbate" the damage.

State wildlife commissioners in June signed off on both new diversions. However, some conservationists contend commissioners weren't fully informed of what scientists are finding about how diversions are hurting river life.

The commissioners received data from the state's 2011 report on loss of aquatic species but did not receive the completed report and its conclusions, said Ken Kehmeier, senior aquatic biologist for Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

Northern Water manager Eric Wilkinson said he and his team "are going to stand on our final environmental-impact statement. That's why we paid \$10 million for it."

Northern has committed \$250,000 to study a possible bypass around the Windy Gap Reservoir and to restore a 14.4-mile stretch of the river below the dam to simulate natural conditions.

"There will always be a difference of opinions as to the amount of water it's going to take" to maintain ecosystem health, Wilkinson said.

The EPA and conservationists may believe at least 1,200 cfs every other year "is what the number should be. We feel we've provided adequate documentation for what we feel the number should be."

Bruce Finley: 303-954-1700, twitter.com/finleybruce or bfinley@denverpost.com.