

River diversion project closer to reality

Windy Gap would bring water to Boulder County

A project designed to pull more water from the Colorado River across the Continental Divide to thirsty Front Range towns -- including some in Boulder County -- is nearing the end of the federal permitting process.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has released the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Windy Gap FIRMING Project, which clears the way for the federal agency to make a final decision about whether the project can move forward.

"It's been a long haul for us, but we see a light at the end of the tunnel," said Dana Strongin, spokeswoman for Northern Water, which is spearheading the project that will serve a number of local towns, including Louisville, Lafayette, Longmont, Broomfield, Erie and Superior. "We entered into this process in 2003. It takes a lot of work to take this water planning and put it into action."

The goal of the Windy Gap FIRMING Project is to make the supply of water from the original Windy Gap project, which was finished in 1985, more reliable. The original Windy Gap project was never able to deliver all the water promised to towns on the Front Range because it has to piggyback on some parts of the Colorado-Big Thompson diversion system to make it across the mountains.

That's a problem because in wet years -- when there's more water to divert from the river -- the Colorado-Big Thompson system doesn't have room to store the Windy Gap water in its already-full reservoir. During dry years, there's room to store Windy Gap water, but the project's water rights are so junior that it can't draw water from the river.

The key feature of the \$270 million firming project, if approved, would be the construction of a new reservoir in Larimer County to solve the storage problem. The proposed Chimney Hollow Reservoir would sit just west of Carter Lake and have a capacity of 90,000 acre-feet. The water to fill the reservoir would largely be pumped through existing pipes and canals.

Environmentalists have been concerned about the effects the Windy Gap project could have on the upper reaches of the Colorado River, which already has been severely depleted. In particular, they worry that taking more water from the headwaters of the Colorado will cause an increase in water temperature, which can be lethal for fish, and a decrease in "flushing flows," which are critical for cleaning out the sediment that can armor the bottom of riverbeds, smothering aquatic insects.

When the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Windy Gap FIRMING Project was released in 2008, Trout Unlimited was one of the groups that said the document was inadequate. Now, the nonprofit organization says the final version of the document is an improvement over the draft, though still not good enough.

"They did recognize that temperature is a big issue -- they recognized that the new project is going to make existing conditions worse unless they have adequate temperature mitigation," said Mely Whiting, a lawyer with Trout Unlimited's Colorado Water Project.

But Whiting says that the document fails to outline adequate mitigation steps.

"It's pretty cut and dried," Whiting said. "We have stream temperature standards adopted by the state of Colorado that tell you what levels are safe for fish. If those levels aren't there, you shouldn't be taking more water."

Trout Unlimited also is concerned that the Final Environmental Impact Statement does not acknowledge the sedimentation problem in the upper Colorado River.

But Northern Water's Strongin points out that the Final Environmental Impact Statement wraps into it a detailed mitigation plan that was unanimously approved earlier this year by the Colorado Wildlife Commission. Northern Water also has partnered with Denver Water, which is proposing its own plan to bring more water to Denver from the Front Range, to collectively address environmental impacts.

Northern Water expects a final decision on the project early next year. If approved, the water district will have to secure a few more permits from state and federal agencies before moving forward. The project could be completed in about five years.

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