

Windy Gap Firing Project receives a boost

A proposed \$270 million water project that would increase the reliability of existing water supplies for the cities of Greeley and Evans, the Central Weld County Water District and 10 other water providers in the region received a significant boost this week.

In what area water officials described as a milestone, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation on Wednesday released the final version of its Final Environmental Impact Statement regarding the proposed Windy Gap Firing Project. In that document, the bureau stated that the chosen method of completing the project is the "least environmentally harmful and most practical alternative," according to Jon Monson, director of the city of Greeley's Water and Sewer Department.

The impact statement marks the last document in the project's National Environmental Policy Act review, which details the necessity for the project, the project impacts and the required mitigation.

"It's a very big deal," Monson said. "Definitely a huge step forward."

Monson said the designing of the project is scheduled to begin sometime next summer or fall. That process will likely take about a year, he added, with actual construction on the project beginning in 2013.

The Windy Gap Firing Project is a collaborative effort among 13 northeastern Colorado water providers. The project's key feature — construction of Chimney Hollow Reservoir southwest of Loveland — would increase the reliability of the existing Windy Gap Project, which started delivering water to Front Range municipalities in 1985.

Windy Gap's junior water rights status makes its supply unreliable from year to year, but with the reservoir, participants could use the same water rights more efficiently and expect 30,000 acre feet of water to be available each year, according to officials with Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District — the public agency that spearheads the operation. One acre-foot of water serves 2½ families of four for one year.

According to Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District estimates, by 2050, northern Colorado's population will nearly double reaching about 1 million, and water demand projections for Windy Gap Firing Project participants show a shortage of 64,000 acre feet in 2030 and 110,000 acre feet by 2050.

The environmental impact statement on the Windy Gap Firing Project represents several years of commitment and coordination among many community water interests, officials said.

"We put a lot time and effort into developing these plans, and we're proud to say that they will make conditions on the Colorado River better in the future than they are today," said Jeff Drager, project manager.

As explained by water conservancy district officials, Chimney Hollow Reservoir would be just west of and slightly smaller than Carter Lake and will be part of Larimer County's Open Lands Program, with non-motorized boating, fishing and trails.