

Editorial: Water project proposal needs consideration

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Improving the process of studying and approving proposed water storage projects is the goal of legislation to be proposed by Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Colo. Streamlining the timetable by imposing clarity and deadlines without changing the substance of the review process makes good sense.

Despite the recent unprecedented rain and flooding, the state continues to have a semi-arid climate and periodic droughts. Allowing proposed water storage projects to drift aimlessly year after year does not serve the public interest.

In a letter to the Secretary of the Interior and others in December, Gardner noted that the Colorado River Basin Study projected a water shortfall of more than 3.2 million acre-feet by 2060. Gardner wrote: "There are many projects far along in planning and permitting stages, including projects like the Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP) in Colorado, that are simply waiting for approval. ... these projects would mean hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of new storage, providing a benefit to municipalities, industries and agriculture."

After nearly 10 years of study, the NISP proposal still hasn't been approved. Gardner is proposing the creation of a federal Office of Water Storage to make the process efficient, thorough and effective.

It is important to note that Gardner's proposal to repair what he calls "the broken permitting system" would not circumvent environmental reviews; however, it would put in place a time frame for an initial decision about whether a project can move forward.

The proposal would ensure that federal officials approve or deny permits for reservoir projects within 270 days after a state's governor endorses a water project. And if a decision isn't made within 365 days of the governor's endorsement, the project would be automatically approved.

Gardner's proposal should get a hearing. The current approach in dealing with vital water storage issues is not working. Waiting years for answers to important proposals is not a wise use of resources. This is a reform that is needed