

Chimney Hollow required patience, vision for future

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Nearly 50 years ago, leaders from several Northern Colorado communities recognized that this area was on steady track toward growth.

At that time, the newly built Interstate 25 north of Denver had no trouble bearing all of the north Front Range traffic on its four lanes of concrete. Community edges were easy to see because of the large number of farms that separated them.

Leaders from Loveland, Longmont, Estes Park, Greeley, Fort Collins and Boulder recognized that as new residents moved to their communities, the need for year-round, uninterrupted water would become ever greater. In response, they formed the Municipal Subdistrict in the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District — now known simply as Northern Water — to acquire water rights on the Western Slope.

Those water rights have been in the district's portfolio, but a large storage area for that water has always seemed just beyond the planning horizon.

That is, until now. With the issuance of a final U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit, planning and construction can begin at full speed for Chimney Hollow Reservoir west of Carter Lake in Larimer County. The 90,000 acre-foot reservoir will hold water collected in above average water years — and help provide a reliable source of water beyond that.

Water projects in Colorado require a commitment to patience — and to communications with many stakeholder groups. While the Windy Gap project has been part of the regional water portfolio for decades, its full allotment has not been pulled from the Colorado River because of the dichotomy surrounding its circumstance. In those years in which there is above-average precipitation, it means Lake Granby and Shadow Mountain Reservoir will also be full or nearly so, which means there isn't the capacity to store that Windy Gap water.

With that capacity likely to come online in the next few years, it will mean the need for communication with Western Slope water users will remain at the forefront — to assure them that water for agriculture, recreation and wildlife management will still be available.

On the Front Range, the additional water will not be just for profligate growth and sprawl. On the contrary, the water that fills Chimney Hollow will add to the overall regional water portfolio. This could have the effect of keeping farms in irrigation rather than having their operators sell to developers who would put quasi-urban neighborhoods in rural settings.

It's likely that leaders in 1970 contemplated how development pressure would affect Northern Colorado agriculture as they came together — and invested taxpayer money — to propose a project some of them might not live long enough to see.

Chimney Hollow Reservoir and the Windy Gap Firming Project is the opportunity for that vision to be fulfilled.