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Big water projects: friends or foes of the Poudre River?

By Cherry Sokoloski
North Forty News

Ever since the first Europeans settled northern Colorado in the 1800s, the Cache la Poudre River has been tapped as a source of water for agriculture, industry and homes. But big projects now on the drawing board--notably the proposed Glade Reservoir and enlargements to Halligan and Seaman-- have some people worried.

Friends of the Poudre, an advocacy group that has been active since 1985, is pushing for what the group calls "positive alternatives" to building new reservoirs and massive enlargements to existing ones. The group opposes Glade Reservoir altogether and wants to see enlargements at Halligan and Seaman kept small.

"It makes a whole lot more sense to enlarge existing dams than to build a whole new mega-dam," said David Lauer, a board member for Friends of the Poudre. "A healthy river does not involve a lot of water storage."

Lauer believes that other measures, including better conservation, could provide for the increased water demands of a growing population.

Friends of the Poudre proposes several alternatives to building a new reservoir such as Glade. The group advocates using gravel pit storage and dredging existing reservoirs. The latter practice, Lauer said, can increase storage capacity by 30 to 40 percent. Enlarging existing reservoirs is also a good idea, Lauer said, provided that the projects are not so large as to deplete the Poudre River.

The Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which is coordinating the Glade project, argues that new storage is needed. A district study indicates that water needs in northeast Colorado will increase 160 percent in the next 30 to 60 years, according to spokesman Brian Werner.

Also, Werner noted, the Glade project will pull water from the Poudre only at peak times and in years of above-normal runoff. "It will take a little off the peak below the Munroe Canal," he said, "but nothing from the upper canyon."

As far as the Halligan/Seaman proposal is concerned, Cliff Hoelscher of Fort Collins Utilities said the project could provide real benefits for the Poudre River. Fort Collins, Greeley and the Tri-Districts are involved in the enlargement project.

Both reservoirs are situated on the North Fork of the Poudre, with Halligan about 16 miles upstream of Seaman. Hoelscher explained that when streamflow is low on the North Fork, water could be released from Halligan and recaptured at Seaman, thus preserving water for the cities' use but improving the health of the North Fork.

On the main stem of the Poudre, a similar scenario could play out. Since Fort Collins and Greeley own high-mountain reservoirs, water could be released from those reservoirs and recaptured at Seaman, again adding to the volume of water in the canyon at times of low flows.

Timing is the crucial issue, Hoelscher said. "We realize the river will never be like it was before we got here," he said, "but we're hoping we can put more water in at critical periods to make the flow more natural again." He said all partners plan to work together to make the ecological enhancements happen. "It can benefit people, the river and wildlife," he said.

The Nature Conservancy is also working with the Halligan/Seaman partners to ensure the river environment is improved.

Keith Elmund, environmental services manager for Fort Collins Utilities, said both the Glade and the Halligan/Seaman projects could be an advantage for the river "if the cards are played right." He would like to see conditions written into the permits that would require augmentation flows from the reservoirs when the river needs some water.

LeRoy Poff, a river ecologist with Colorado State University, also had a comment about the permitting process. The cumulative effect of projects taking water out of the river at peak flow should be scientifically evaluated, he said, to be sure the river receives a healthy scouring in the spring. He recommended the U.S. Geological Survey as an agency with the necessary expertise to examine the issue.

Following is a brief summary of project impacts on streamflow in the Poudre River. One of the projects, the Pleasant Valley Pipeline, went online in 2004.

Glade Reservoir (proposed): Because of its junior water rights, the project can take water only at peak times, mostly May and June, and in years when the snowpack is above average. The Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District estimates that Glade would be able to pull water from the river about half the time. In the years that water would be diverted, the project could take 6 to 10

percent of the river's total volume, or about 30,000 acre-feet in one year.

Halligan/Seaman Reservoirs (proposed enlargements): The water rights used to store water in these enlarged reservoirs are not new. Except in rare years when a junior right kicks in, no additional water would be pulled from the Poudre.

Pleasant Valley Pipeline: This project, which diverts Poudre River water to treatment plants for Fort Collins and Greeley, uses mostly water that was already being taken from the river. However, the pipeline has caused changes in the point and timing of diversions as well as return flow locations. During the summer months, the pipeline causes streamflow in the lower Poudre Canyon to decrease and streamflow downstream of Fort Collins to increase. In very high-flow years, a new junior right will take an additional 3,450 acre-feet annually from the river. The project can take a maximum of 180 cubic feet per second from the Poudre during spring runoff. The average peak flow is 3,033 cfs at the mouth of the canyon.

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