

Cache la Poudre: the most endangered river in America

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There is a new distinction for Fort Collins: home to the Cache la Poudre River, now one of America's Most Endangered Rivers.

The Cache la Poudre River is a natural beauty that is loved by kayakers, anglers, photographers and children. The upper stretch of river is the only "National Wild and Scenic River" in Colorado, as designated by an Act of Congress. The lower stretch is a cultural and recreational hub that defines downtown Fort Collins. But because of the proposed massive dam and reservoir scheme called the Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP/Glade Reservoir), our river's future is in serious jeopardy.

The proposed NISP/Glade Reservoir endangers the life of the Poudre and the well-being of our region for many reasons, but in the theme of lists, here are the Top 5 reasons why Colorado residents should take swift action against NISP:

1. Ecological degradation to the river:

The Poudre is already severely degraded with 60 percent of its water drained before it gets to Fort Collins. NISP/Glade Reservoir will drain another 35 percent of what's left, leaving only 25 percent of the natural flow. The river, and all of the flora and fauna that depend on it, will be severely impacted.

2. Severe degradation to the investment in the natural areas: Through open space taxes and Great Outdoors Colorado grants, the residents of Fort Collins, Larimer County, and Colorado have invested tens of millions of dollars in preserving natural areas and providing bike paths and other access to the Poudre River through Fort Collins. It doesn't make sense to drain the river when this investment is entirely dependent on a healthy river to provide the recreational, aesthetic and ecological benefits residents enjoy.

3. Debt disaster in the making:

If built, much of NISP/Glade would be debt-funded, and would thus necessitate rapid growth to pay back the debt, at a time when growth and housing starts have been dampened by the mortgage crisis. Small cities with minimal resources would be required to mortgage their residents' livelihoods for 30 years. Including the interest on the capital costs, NISP is nearly a billion-dollar, debt-ridden project.

4. NISP/Glade will dry up farms and won't solve the water crisis: At least 20,000 acres of farms would have to be paved over to pay back the debt. Draining the river, which NISP/Glade would do, will only provide a drop in the bucket of the total new water demand in the region. These growing cities should follow the lead of cities like Aurora and first conserve all the water they can, and second, enter into mutually beneficial water-exchange agreements with farmers.

5. Threat to Fort Collins' economy:

Fort Collins calls the environment and the river one of its "economic engines," and the downtown economy is increasingly dependent on the river as a cultural and recreational resource. The Downtown River District, Beet Street, and UniverCity Connections all identify the river as a major driver in the downtown experience.

We, Fort Collins residents, are passionate about protecting our Poudre River, and that passion is strongly supported by the hard facts of this

project's far-reaching negative impacts. In two weeks, the Army Corps of Engineers will release its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) about the proposed NISP/Glade Reservoir. The release of the DEIS will be accompanied by a "public comment period" where we residents actually, and finally, get a real voice in this devastating river-destruction scheme.

The Best Place to Live in America should not have the Most Endangered River in America!

Together, let's Save the Poudre, take it off the "Most Endangered Rivers" list, and make the next accolade that Colorado receives reflect our residents' commitment to our beautiful natural resources. Visit www.SaveThePoudre.org, join our mailing list, and we'll keep you posted on how to take action.

Gary Wockner, Ph.D., lives in Fort Collins, and is the spokesperson for the Save The Poudre Coalition.

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