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Community

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With Colorado cities facing austere watering restrictions and farmers unable to plant crops this year, U.S. Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, believes the wait for a decision on the Northern Integrated Supply Project has gone on too long.

“The unpredictable nature of snowpack and rainfall in Colorado underscores the need for more water storage in good years, so we are better prepared for the bad ones,” said Gardner who is hoping to hurry along a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decision regarding the project. “NISP would provide the water storage we need to support northern Colorado’s growing communities and provide protection to farmers and families when the weather turns dry.”

An Environmental Impact Study process conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the project has already taken nine years and cost the participants about \$11 million. The congressman is currently drafting water-storage legislation to streamline the approval process for projects like NISP, according to a statement from his office.

“This will ensure that these projects don’t drag on for decades and waste millions of dollars,” said Rachael Boxer-George, Gardner’s spokeswoman. “We are going to set a deadline on when the initial application needs to be approved or denied. The length of the EIS process is being discussed as we draft this bill, but so far we’re focusing on just the permits.”

Ten-year waits on an EIS are certainly not unprecedented, for instance the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District has gone through a similar wait on the Windy Gap firming project. But as growing municipalities on the Front Range seek new quality water sources, the undammed Cache-La Poudre is a natural place to look, and participants in NISP includes not only Weld and Larimer county water districts and municipalities, but also Erie, Lafayette and the Left Hand water district in Boulder County.

Though the two project elements will not actually dam the Poudre, the project has also attracted substantial opposition, including Western Resource Advocates of Boulder. That organization has suggested a program of water conservation, reuse of municipal water and transfer and coordinated use of agricultural water could provide the same amount of water while maintaining the riparian ecosystem of the Poudre.

“I certainly hope the congressman doesn’t believe that he can cut out public input on this process,” said Laura Belanger, the water resources engineer with the Boulder environmental organization.

The primary focus of the project is to capture water during wet years to provide about 40,000 acre feet of firm yield primary through building the off-channel, 170,000-acre-foot Glade Reservoir (larger than Horsetooth Reservoir) north of the intersection of U.S. 287 and Colorado 14. Water from the Poudre would be piped to Glade from near the mouth of the

canyon, meaning that the freestone nature of the river, which supports a great deal of rafting and fishing recreation, would be maintained though most the canyon.

The project also includes the 44,000-acre-foot Galeton Reservoir east of Ault, where South Platte River water could be stored. In all, it's a somewhat complicated bit of water engineering, designed to allow water exchange and delivery across much of northern Front Range.

Environmental organizations have claimed that eliminating the high flows from the Poudre will damage the riparian ecosystem, but the real hang up on the EIS hasn't really come from that opposition. The supplemental EIS that has things snagged is actually an attempt to coordinate the NISP project with two other projects proposed by the cities of Fort Collins and Greeley, enlargement of the Halligan and Milton-Seaman Reservoirs on the North Fork of the Poudre.

Enlargement of these two on-channel reservoirs could store more than 40,000 acre feet of water, which would also deplete runoff on the lower Poudre. Essentially, the ruling on the draft EIS was that the NISP project had to coordinate data with that from the Halligan-Seaman enlargements, giving everyone a clearer picture on the future of the river.

The ruling required a supplemental draft EIS, said Eric Wilkinson, the executive director of the Northern Water Conservancy District, which coordinates the NISP project and the EIS process for the 15 participants.

"The process can be frustrating," Wilkinson admits. "You have the folks out in Fort Lupton and Fort Morgan — those cities are really the ones concerned about the water coming out of residents' taps."

Still, Wilkinson said there often isn't much choice, given the highly detailed analysis that must be completed.

"It takes time and it takes money to do," he said. "It is driven by the degree of specificity of that analysis and obviously one of the driving factors is the 'defendability' of the analysis."

Chandler Peter, the NEPA coordinator with the Army Corps of Engineers, who oversees the EIS process on both projects, echoed that statement.

"What we end up with has to be defensible," Peter said. Although four years, may seem like a long time to coordinate hydrologic data, Peter said that the complexity lies in making sure that the legal issues that surround existing water exchanges are considered.

Peter said the hydrologic model is now working, meaning the Corps could soon move ahead on the EIS, although no estimate on its completion was available.