

Is NISP cost too high for environment?

By Gene Sears
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Driving along U.S. Highway 287 between the towering ridgelines that mark the east and west boundaries of the proposed Glade Reservoir, the enormity of the proposed water storage basin becomes immediately apparent. Standing on the surface of the would-be submerged portion of the highway, (slated for relocation) a major truck route interrupted only by Yellowstone National Park as it runs the width of the United States, the concept of 170,000 acre-feet of water overhead nearly defies imagination.

This project is big, very big. Yet, as massive as Glade may become, it has yet to outstrip the controversy on whether the reservoir should be built at all.

The most hotly contested component of NISP, or the Northern Integrated Supply Project, Glade Reservoir has come to symbolize the rift between those who say increased water storage solutions are critical to the future growth of Front Range communities and those who claim that projects like NISP will destroy the wild legacy of rivers like the Cache la Poudre, Colorado's only designated wild and scenic river.

Intended as an off-channel reservoir, the Glade Basin would pull water from the Poudre during peak flow periods, rather than damming the river itself. Although the design is considered less damaging than interrupting the primary river flow, peak siphoning is not without significant environmental concerns. Peak flows renew riparian ecosystems by flushing contaminants and sediments, restoring habitats and decreasing algal growth. The Poudre, already suffering from dry periods due to existing diversions, simply can't afford the loss, according to opponents of the project – not while other less invasive alternatives exist.

"Waste not, want not was one of the first lessons all of us learned growing up, but it's a maxim that some government officials seem to have forgotten," said Rebecca

Wodder, president of American Rivers, a nonprofit organization self-described as dedicated to the protection and restoration of North America's rivers, who list the Poudre as No. 3 on their list of America's most endangered rivers.

"While Colorado is facing some serious problems when it comes to water scarcity, draining the Poudre dry simply isn't the solution."

According to American Rivers, the solution lies more in conservation than storage basins, a multi-layered approach without the associated taxpayer burden a project the size and scope of NISP would engender. In a press release dated April 17, the agency claims "Colorado municipalities and water districts have yet to embrace the solutions that others across the country have. Many metropolises have adopted tiered water rates that would provide financial incentives for customers to use less water, and penalize those who are wasteful. Others provide discounted or even free water smart fixtures and appliances for residents. And farmers all across America are dumping flood irrigation, an idea straight out of the last millennium and switching to pivot and drip irrigation systems."

With projected overall upfront costs bumping more than \$400 million – all to be paid for by municipal water providers invested in the project – NISP carries with it a financial burden many opponents find distasteful, and to some, unconscionable as well.

"This project really goes off the deep end," said Gary Wockner, spokesman for the Save the Poudre Coalition. "There are some cost-effective and common sense solutions that experts agree could make this project unnecessary. It's really irresponsible to be dodging a problem we can solve today, and instead forcing our children to pay for it tomorrow."

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