



- SAM NOBLETT / For The Tribune

Leaders wistful about Poudre's excess water as Weld continues to eye rising river

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Northern Colorado water leaders are generally thrilled with the amount of water on the Poudre River, which continued to inch up to season highs on Wednesday, but the glass in this case also is half-empty.

The reservoir that officials have been trying to build for the last decade would come in quite handy right about now, since all that excess water is flowing through the region en route to Nebraska. A wet spring has already satisfied the immediate needs of northern Colorado farmers and other water users, and the seven-year drought has been officially over for two years.

It's called a "free river" now — all water rights have been satisfied and anyone who wants water can have it.

"Now, nobody's taking much water," said Brian Werner, spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. "Farmers don't need it, they want warm days to start the growing process. We'd like to store some of it. We just need some buckets somewhere."

Excess water is floating downstream to Nebraska, about 500 cubic feet per second more than the law requires. It's water that could have been diverted for future storage, water officials say.

Water officials have been working for years to get approval to build the Glade Reservoir as part of the Northern Integrated Supply Project to capture that excess water and store for future water use. The district — which is low on the totem pole of water right-holders on the river — has the right to take a maximum of 1,000 cubic feet per second from the Poudre to fill that reservoir, once other senior water rights have been met. The Army Corps of Engineers continues to study the environmental impact of NISP and plans to issue a decision sometime next year.

"When there's a whole lot of water, and everyone's rights are satisfied, then we can take something," Werner said. "We would be able to take water now because everyone is being satisfied. We could be diverting right now."

With river flows from the last three years, Werner said, the Glade would have been full or partially full already.

Werner said from 2009-10, 600,000 acre-feet of water left the state above the interstate compact amount required by law. That would be the equivalent of four Horsetooth Reservoirs, Werner said.

"This year, the early estimates are well above that number. In this year alone, it could be 600,000 to 1 million acre-feet, and we won't know until we're done," Werner said. "There is going to be a boatload of water going past us because we're all full."

Gary Wockner, executive director of Save the Poudre, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting the NISP project, said regardless of the excess water, the river flows contribute to an ecological system that shouldn't be disturbed.

"Water in rivers serves an ecologic function to keep the river and the ecosystem healthy," Wockner said. "If NISP is built, the flooding will be worse."

He said that the Environmental Protection Agency and the cities of Fort Collins and Greeley noted that flooding could get worse along the Poudre if the river was robbed of its peak flows, which naturally clean out the silt and debris build-up.

Greeley water and sewer director Jon Monson said the Corps' draft Environmental Impact Statement didn't fully address the issue of peak flows.

"Flows are insufficient today because of the various ditches and other things impacting the river," Monson said. "We're getting silt built up today. That's what we wanted the Corps to address."

Wockner's group has opposed NISP, stating that it would drain the Poudre River through Fort Collins.

"NISP won't just take water in a year where it's extremely high run-off, it will take it in a dry" year too, Wockner said. "In downtown Fort Collins, 60 percent of Poudre is already diverted. If NISP is built, it will take up to half of what's left. Less than 25 percent of Poudre River will still flow through Fort Collins."

Dave Nettles, Division 1 water engineer for the state Division of Water Resources, said the South Platte River Compact, an interstate agreement between Colorado and Nebraska, requires 120 cfs to be flowing at the state line from April 1 to Oct. 15 before some junior water right holders have to give up their rights to meet that quota. Though it is the South Platte River, much of its flow comes from the Poudre River as it meets the Platte east of Greeley, Nettles said. On Wednesday, he said, the river flowed at 650 cfs at the state line.

"If we had the ability to store the water, a place to put it, we could store much of the water that is flowing across the state line," Nettles said. "And that's been the case for much of the last month."

While water users are happy, the concern of flooding in Greeley grows. River flows hit highs again Wednesday of more than 3,350 cfs at the canyon mouth; in the river gauge near Greeley, the flow was at 2,100 cfs, with water depth of more than 8 feet, one foot below flood stage. Some lower areas already have seen flooding, such as west Greeley at 71st Avenue, which the city closed on Tuesday. No new closures were reported Wednesday.

Werner said if the district were able to divert some of that high water to storage, flooding would be minimized downstream.

And though there are still many expected closures due to flooding, so far, officials are pleased with the way the water has come down.

"Ideal would be it comes out slow enough so we could use it all up and have no extra," said Nettles, who is in charge of the diversion of water throughout northern Colorado. "We'll see what happens in the next few days. Now, it's certainly higher than would be ideal, but if the weather forecast holds and next few days are cooler than they have been, that may really help us in the fact that ... (the river) would probably level out."

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