

NISP project won't solve region's water problems

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Written by

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The Northern Colorado region (Weld and Larimer counties) is at a tipping point. In many ways, we are already over-populated, yet projections show a doubling of our population (adding another 550,000 people) by 2040. If this occurs, the consequences to our Colorado landscape and lifestyle will be immense.

As can be expected in a rapidly growing area, we now have communities/groups of people with significantly different values and interests that are increasingly at odds with each other.

The dispute over NISP and Glade Reservoir (one of the NISP projects) is one of the increasingly difficult conflicts that will occur as we irresponsibly continue to pack more development and people into this arid region.

The pro-NISP side primarily values the Poudre River and its water as a commodity to be exploited; historically used for irrigation and with NISP, to enable population and economic growth in the increasingly urbanized Northern Colorado region.

The proponents are led by the taxpayer-funded Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, which represents 15 participants providing water to towns such as Eaton, Severance, Erie, Frederick, Firestone and others. Historically, these towns were very small, agriculturally dependent communities. Recently, like our neighboring towns of Timnath and Windsor (also NISP participants), they have been among the fastest-growing towns in the state, with aggressive expansion plans.

The anti-Glade side is led by the Save The Poudre, or STP, a grass-roots organization that values the river for recreational, environmental, societal and economic reasons. Its mission is to "Protect and Restore the Cache La Poudre River." Many of its supporters live here because of our great quality of life and strongly value an environmentally sound river.

The impact of NISP on agriculture is disputed. Proponents assert that Glade Reservoir is necessary to prevent the "dry up" of 60,000 acres of irrigated agriculture in Northern Colorado region.

However, both the validity and sincerity of this claim is questionable. According to a recent STP study, www.save.thepoudre.org/docs/farm-facts-april2011.pdf, the planned growth in the NISP communities would result in at least 67,000 acres of farmland being dried up.

(Page 2 of 2)

In Timnath alone, 13,000 acres of agricultural land is slated for development as it adds 30,000 people. One only needs to drive by any of these towns to see irrigated agriculture being converted to houses and strip malls.

If NISP proponents are truly concerned about protecting agriculture, then why aren't they concerned about the massive conversion of ag land to municipal use occurring throughout Northern Colorado? Many of these same people have done nothing to help preserve farmland and, in fact, have actively promoted development on these lands.

There are lots of things that can be done to protect agriculture in Northern Colorado. NISP is not one of them. Real tools include preventing transfers of water rights or rezoning of land from agricultural use to municipal use, limiting Urban Growth Areas, making growth pay its own way, promoting and funding agricultural conservation, and others.

The NISP project will not solve the water situation or protect agriculture in a region without good land-use planning that is intent on growing as fast as it possibly can.

However, it will surely dewater the Poudre River through Fort Collins, with severe, permanent and negative economic, environmental, recreational and societal impacts for Fort Collins residents and others who value the Poudre River as more than a commodity.

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