

NISP Will Change More Than Just Water

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The proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project will change more than just river water.

The Cache la Poudre River and regional wetlands are popular destinations for Berthoud's birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts. It is one of the few remaining free running river systems in the U.S. and was recently added to American Rivers' annual most endangered list. The Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP) would divert thousands of acre-feet of water from the river to feed two reservoirs.

The Army Corps of Engineers issued its draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that analyzes possible effects to water flow, wildlife habitats, local economies and geology. The report evaluates four different alternative plans, including leaving the Poudre River as it is.

The EIS also identifies regional trends that are likely to continue, such as increases in population and need for municipal water supplies, decrease in agricultural water use, and an increase in conservation measures for all uses. These trends would occur with or without NISP.

The combination of dams, reservoirs and increased water demands would have major effects on both land and water areas in the region. Water ecosystems will be impacted by lower river levels just below the proposed dam where water will be diverted during the river's peak flow, typically in June and July. Water will be diverted into the proposed Glade Reservoir during these high flow seasons.

But, according to Colorado Water Institute Director Reagan Waskom, rivers are more than just water. He said, "Rivers move sediment; they feed the wetland areas and they are habitats for many different sets of species." He emphasized that all of these aspects of the river would be impacted by diverting and storing the water elsewhere.

However, he said, it's important to understand how the proposed projects will fit in with existing ones, and what the cumulative impact will be.

The EIS lists several specific impacts, including "channel scouring" (river washing sediment and debris downstream), watershed levels and habitat changes for river and land species such as the Preble's meadow jumping mouse. The proposed Glade Reservoir north of Fort Collins would cover over its habitat, which provides hunting grounds for snakes, hawks and other predators. Because the Preble's mouse is listed on the Environmental Protection Agency's endangered list, its habitats are special cases in development of projects like dams and reservoirs.

"We can take a look at the specific problems," Waskom said, "but it all comes down to the overall health of the environment, and that's the big question."

Critics of the project have requested a 90-day extension for the public comment period, which ends July 30.