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Poudre River flows pique interest

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These are high times for the Poudre River through Fort Collins.

With warm temperatures melting mountain snowpack, the river's flow is near its anticipated peak for the season, according to data collected at a U.S. Geological Survey stream gauge near Lincoln Street.

"The peak is late this year because of the weather and all the snow in the mountains," said Brian Werner, spokesman for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. "But it's still churning pretty good."

The river's flow through the city is of keen interest to water managers, recreation enthusiasts and environmentalists alike. It's one of the major issues surrounding Northern Water's proposal to build Glade Reservoir as part of the Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP.

It's bound to be brought up repeatedly during a series of public hearings scheduled this week in Fort Collins and Greeley to take comment on the draft Environmental Impact Statement, or EIS, on the massive project issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Opponents of NISP say the river is already overburdened with its water taken for municipal and agricultural uses.

Decreasing flows further would damage the river's ecosystem and hinder city efforts to capitalize on the Poudre as an economic driver, said Mark Easter of the Save the Poudre Coalition.

"This is the time when the river should be restored and its flows enhanced," he said. "It shouldn't be further degraded."

Supporters say the water that would be supplied by NISP is needed to meet anticipated growth in the 15 regional municipalities and water districts that would foot the bill for the \$426 million project. While draws from the Poudre to fill Glade would certainly lower downstream flows, the effects can be balanced out through a variety of measures, Werner said.

"We've always said there are going to be impacts," he said. "And they can be mitigated."

No easy answer

Increasing the river's flow or even maintaining a year-round minimal flow is not a simple matter.

The Poudre has been a working river since 1860 when early settlers tapped its water to irrigate farmland. Disputes over its water played a role in crafting the state's system for establishing water rights and appropriations.

Essentially, the system is first in time, first in priority. Each year holders of senior rights are first in line to get water and junior-rights holders have to wait their turn. Depending on precipitation and water

availability, sometimes there's none to be had.

Water rights may be sold and traded and their seniority kept intact. A state court system is dedicated to adjudicating claims and establishing rights.

Keeping more water in the Poudre would require dedicating a right to that purpose, a notion being explored by officials and river advocates, said Gary Wockner, a member of the Fort Collins Water Board.

Wockner is also a spokesman for the Save the Poudre Coalition, which is comprised of organizations opposed to the Glade project.

Fort Collins has senior water rights it uses for drought protection that could be used to maintain the river's flow through the city, Wockner said.

Other cities, including Boulder and Golden, have worked through the in-stream program of the Colorado Water Conservation Board to maintain in-stream flow rights.

Fort Collins, which donated a small amount of water to the program to protect a section of stream that flows into the Poudre, could do the same, Wockner said.

The city is "kicking around ideas" on how to get more water in the Poudre through town, said Dennis Bode, water resources manager. But using a right identified for drought protection may not fit with the city's big-picture water needs.

"It kind of defeats the purpose of a reservoir and storage if you just let it run through," Bode said.

Another option

Glade Reservoir would be built north of Ted's Place and draw water from the river near the mouth of Poudre Canyon. Its largest draws would be during times of high flows, primarily during the spring runoff.

High-flow draws would likely occur four out of 10 years, Northern Water officials say, when the water can be drawn would be based on the priority of water rights.

As high as the river is currently, the high-water rights for drawing into Glade would not be in effect and are not likely to kick in this year, Werner said.

The reservoir would draw some water every month of the year through exchanges with two irrigation companies that would end up getting water from Galeton Reservoir, which through NISP would be built northeast of Greeley.

The Poudre's flow through Fort Collins would be reduced 25 to 71 percent based on monthly averages, according to the draft EIS.

A potential way to enhance the river's flow could be found through a concept called "compensatory environmental storage," said Neil Grigg, professor of mechanical engineering at Colorado State University and former director of the Water Resource Center.

Through the program, participants in NISP might provide storage space to Fort Collins and other entities in Glade for later release that would boost the river's environmental flows, Grigg said.

Consistent flows would strengthen the river's ecosystem and help the Fort Collins' economic goals, he said. Such a program would require the cooperation of entities drawing from the river and coordination of those draws.

"This is a very complex issue that would require detailed agreements and a lot of coordination among the various entities," he said. "But I see it as a pro-active approach."

Flows matter

Fort Collins residents place high value on the river and maintaining its flows through the city, according to a recent study by CSU economist John Loomis.

A survey of residents done as part of the study found a third of respondents said they would visit the river less if its flows were cut in half, with 5 percent saying they would stop visiting.

Those surveyed said they would be willing to pay an average of \$342 a year to maintain spring and summer flows in the river.

Downtown business owner Bill Sears said market forces have more to do with the ability to sell and develop property along the river than the level of the Poudre.

"If people are serious about increasing flows, someone has to step forward with the rights or be willing to pay for them," he said.
