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Residents flood hearings with comments on NISP

By Cherry Sokoloski
North Forty News

As expected, turnout was large when the Army Corps of Engineers hosted three public hearings on the Northern Integrated Supply Project in June.

A total of 680 people attended the hearings, two of which were held in Fort Collins and one in Greeley.

"Obviously this is a project that is near and dear to local residents," said Chandler Peter of the Army Corps, who served as hearing officer for all three meetings.

The Army Corps released a draft environmental impact statement for NISP on April 30. NISP calls for building two new reservoirs, Glade northwest of LaPorte and Galeton northeast of Greeley. It would supply domestic water to 15 communities and water districts in northern Colorado. Neither Fort Collins nor Greeley is a participant in the project.

At the Fort Collins hearings, officials from Weld County turned out in force to support NISP, saying it would preserve agriculture in the fast-growing county. However, most Larimer County speakers opposed the project, citing detrimental effects to the Cache la Poudre River.

Ed Clark, mayor of Greeley, said Weld and Larimer counties combined are expected to grow from a population of 520,000 to 950,000 in the next 20 years. NISP, he said, is a better alternative than drying up ag land to supply the water that is needed.

Weld County Commissioner Rob Masden agreed. "People don't realize what agriculture means to Greeley, Weld County and the state," he said.

Weld County, Masden noted, is one of the top five agricultural counties in the United States.

According to Mark Sponsler of Ault, who represented the Colorado Corn Growers Association, impacts to agriculture affect entire rural communities, since the industry is a major economic engine. Also, he noted, the loss of agriculture means the loss of locally produced food.

It has been estimated that 34,000 to 69,000 acres of irrigated farm ground could be dried up if NISP is not built.

Hank Brown, former state senator and congressman, spoke in favor of NISP, saying the project will "significantly improve minimum streamflow."

Brown said the compromise resulting in a Wild and Scenic River designation for part of the Poudre was accomplished by recognizing that future water storage would be needed. He also said that the dry-up of ag land is a "huge environmental phenomenon" affecting climate and humidity.

Dave Lindsay, town engineer for Firestone which is one of the NISP participants, said a disproportionate amount of growth has occurred in small towns in northern Colorado because of "development policies of some towns," especially Fort Collins.

Some challenged the science behind the EIS. LeRoy Poff, a river ecologist at Colorado State University, said the report showed an "inadequate understanding of river ecology." He stated that peak flows on the river play a positive, critical role in maintaining habitat diversity, and that over-bank flows would be eliminated in most years if the project is built.

The EIS concluded there would be "minimum adverse environmental effects," but Poff and others argued that the effects would be more detrimental than that.

Several speakers recommended that, if the project is built, all possible mitigations that would increase streamflow in the Poudre should be implemented. The EIS has identified several possible mitigations.

George Splittgerber of Fort Collins said the effects of global warming were not adequately addressed in the EIS. "What will happen when the water doesn't come?" he asked.

Some stated that NISP is a short-term solution at best; it is estimated to satisfy water demands until 2025 to 2050, depending on the participant. After that, some said, ag land would have to be dewatered anyway.

Sandy Lemberg of Bellvue had an answer to the growth dilemma. "Just because you want to grow doesn't mean you can grow," he said. "If there's no water, don't approve building permits." Former county commissioner Karen Wagner, who is opposed to the project, said it's "time to acknowledge that they're not making

rivers like the Poudre anymore."

Several speakers said that water conservation has not been addressed adequately. Thomas Wilding, a Larimer County resident, complained that "water use is staggeringly high" in Colorado.

"A 50 percent reduction in water use is ridiculously achievable, and this is how we begin to live in a semi-arid area," he said. Given the current waste of water, Wilding added, "NISP is like a 300-pound child asking you for a lifetime supply of donuts."

The next public meeting will be hosted by the Larimer County Commissioners on July 9, 6:30 p.m., in the first-floor hearing room of the Larimer County Courthouse Offices Building. The commissioners will take public testimony, and they plan to formalize comments for the Army Corps by the end of July. The meeting will be televised on local cable channels.

The public may read the EIS at local libraries. People may send comments to the Corps at 9307 S. Wadsworth Blvd., Littleton CO 80128 or by e-mail to chandler.j.peter@usace.army.mil. The deadline for submitting comments is July 30. Many people at the hearings asked for an extension of the public comment period, and a decision on that request is expected early in July.

To read articles previously published in the North Forty News concerning NISP and its potential impacts, go to the newspaper's [web page archives](#). Articles were published in April and May 2006; in May 2007; and in May and June 2008.

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