

editorial

Think before we drain the Poudre

By The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 06/06/2008 12:31:43 PM MDT

A massive \$426 million water project, anchored by the proposed 170,000-acre-foot Glade Reservoir, will reshape the face of northern Colorado for the rest of this century if it is built.

With the stakes so high for the region's economy, environment and lifestyle, it's important not to rush blindly into a decision on the Northern Integrated Supply Project, designed to supply water for at least 80,000 new homes in the area.

That's why The Post urges the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to grant the request of Fort Collins and Greeley, supported by Larimer County, for an additional 90 days to review the massive draft environmental impact statement released April 30.

The NISP issue could shape up as the largest environmental controversy in the state since the administration of President George H.W. Bush vetoed the proposed Two Forks Dam on the South Platte River in November 1990. That's why it's vital to review it carefully before deciding to authorize, or veto, the project.

The draft environmental impact statement itself runs to 700 data-packed pages. Supporting technical appendices total more than 2,500 pages. Backers, opponents and the cities affected by the project haven't had time for their experts to evaluate that information.

Yet, the Corps has allowed for only 90 days to review and comment on the DEIS — a period that ends July 30. The cities want that date extended by 90 days to Oct. 28.

It's a reasonable request. The NISP project has been a gleam in developers' eyes for 40 years, but the massive DEIS revealed some new and surprising information. For one thing, the project could result in a 71 percent drop in peak flows in the Cache la Poudre River — which even one of the project's boosters conceded would reduce the majestic waterway to a "trickle" as it passes through Fort Collins and further downstream.

Plus, impounding the spring runoff would reduce the Poudre to little more than a storm sewer by eliminating its ability to renew itself by scouring silt and algae from its natural pools. Last, but by no means least, the NISP plan would have major effects on Fort Collins' water quality, which would take tens of millions to remedy.

There may well be ways to mitigate and even resolve these problems, but the experts involved need time to review and analyze the voluminous data and prepare a response.

If the Corps tries to ram the project through without such a thorough review, it can expect the kinds of lawsuits and political protests that killed Two Forks.

The Corps should give Fort Collins and Greeley the time they need to evaluate this massive project.

Don't let haste make waste of northern Colorado.