

Water wars come to the suburbs

This is the second in a three-part series exploring the proposed NISP water project in Northern Colorado



(Photo/hypergurl, Flickr)

By **Jason Kosena** 06/19/2008 | [1 Comment](#)

The city of Lafayette has long known the thirst of a Colorado drought. In 1977, a blisteringly dry summer forced city officials to sound sirens throughout the small city northwest of Denver, to signal residents to stop all non-critical water usage. The city was at risk of losing adequate water for fire protection.

Working with few resources, compared with neighboring communities like Denver and Boulder, Lafayette officials began securing additional water rights after that drought 31 years ago. Strict conservation practices for residents were also implemented.

Lafayette's search for more water has led the city to join with 14 other municipalities in Colorado pushing for the proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project (NISP) — a \$405 million effort to tap the Poudre and South Platte rivers for more water.

The largest infrastructure plan proposed in Northern Colorado in decades, NISP would construct miles of pipeline and the massive 170,000 acre-foot Glade Reservoir north of Fort Collins to support the 15 communities.

Lafayette, currently with a population of 25,000, would use nearly 4 percent of an annual 40,000 acre-feet of water generated by NISP.

"The NISP project is playing a key role in the future water supply in Lafayette," said Lafayette Mayor Chris Cameron. "(Droughts) have had a severe impact on businesses and citizens in the city. They have had a serious economic impact as well."

Conservation before construction

NISP opponents, including a well-organized citizen group called "Save the Poudre" have criticized the project, calling it detrimental to the source of where the water would come from, the Poudre River — and an open door to unbridled growth and urban sprawl.

Critics have urged the 15 towns and cities pushing NISP to consider alternatives, including enhanced conservation and efficiency practices.

"Conservation and efficiency is cheaper, faster and smarter than other water measures," said Becky Long, water caucus coordinator with the Colorado Environmental Coalition, which has been critical of the project but has yet to take an official position on the proposed plan.

In addition to conservation, Long added that other measures, including partnerships with agricultural producers, should be on the table instead of blind construction of new reservoirs.

But mayors like Lafayette's Cameron cry foul to that argument, highlighting the conservation practices and responsible tiered water rates that they've already had in place for decades.

In fact, many of the NISP communities support more extensive conservation practices than larger communities that surround them.

"Our City Council has decreased 960 acres of its urban growth boundary (in recent years), stopping the construction of more than 4,800 homes," Cameron said, rebuffing the unbridled growth argument. "We have some of the lowest per-person (water) use rates in the state and likely in much of the Western United States."

Lafayette isn't alone.

The town of Dacono requires new customers to provide necessary water for development either through dedication of water or cash for the town to purchase it.

Users within the Left Hand Water District have employed a conservation program to reduce water losses by 50 percent. Left Hand's loss rate is one of the lowest in the nation, outdoing Denver Water, which is much heralded for its conservation practices.

"And still, we're not going to have enough water in coming years," said Bo Shaffer, a district director and Boulder County commissioner candidate.

Impact on Colorado agriculture

During a sometimes-emotional five-hour hearing designed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to collect public comment about the project, NISP supporters said failure to construct the massive Glade Reservoir will equate to a serious loss of Eastern Plains farmland.

Because farmers often hold senior water rights, growing municipalities with deep pockets often look their way when looking to increase municipal water supplies.

The cities of Thornton and Aurora in the Denver metro area have largely purchased agricultural water, and many of the 15 towns pushing NISP are threatening to do the same.

"NISP offers great opportunity and is of huge benefit for the agricultural community," said Windsor Mayor John Vazquez. "With the rising price of fuel we cannot be importing feed and add to pollution by trucking in corn and grains (that) we could be using our own irrigated fields to (grow)."

Bill Bohn with the Colorado Farm Bureau said that without NISP, an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 acres of irrigated farmland would be lost, including 100 square miles of crop production.

"Our forefathers had insight to build Horsetooth Reservoir (and) the Colorado Big Thompson project in order to benefit future generations," Bohn said to the Corps. "At the time of (those projects) there were people who were saying that it wasn't needed. But I think it's obvious what impacts they have had on Colorado agriculture."

The Farm Bureau's estimation of lost farmland is being disputed, though, by some, including

Long with the Colorado Environmental Coalition.

"Most of that growth NISP is preparing for will come in green fields ... which is likely agricultural land," Long said. "NISP is going to help provide water for growth that will pave over agricultural land."

Coming up next:

-- Environmentalists say this project would serve a deathblow to the Poudre River. Part three of the series will explore the impacts of a massive reservoir on the environment and on the animals and people living near it.

Part 1: [Heated Glade Reservoir debate shows many have something at stake](#)

-- Growing communities along Colorado's Front Range push for two new man-made reservoirs in Northern Colorado (NISP) to help secure increasing demands for water. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is accepting public comment on the project and environmentalists and local governments are making their opposition known.

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coyotegulch

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Jason,

This is the key issue in building more storage, "Will it save farms or cause more sprawl?" Conservation really does only go so far. A report by Western Resource Advocates last year

(<http://radio.weblogs.com/0101170/2007/11/09.html#a9556>) pretty much concluded that most municipalities along the Front Range were doing a good job with conservation. They embarrassed the towns with no programs so we should see conservation plans pop up everywhere. Glade is a good compromise on storage. Off the main stem of the Poudre, to be filled by runoff in high years and exchanges with ag. Remember that Northern and the cities involved gave up a main stem reservoir on the Poudre in exchange for a future reservoir during negotiations for the Poudre's Wild and Scenic status. Glade is that future reservoir.

Even with Glade northern Colorado will lose some farmland over the next few years. For many farmers their water is their retirement. The 3 million new Coloradans that are coming need to be accommodated. Save the Poudre still has the best ad on either side of the controversy (http://www.savethepoudre.org/images/endangered_river/save...).

Coyote Gulch

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