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Water storage in Northern Colorado

Guest column by Mark Sponsler

We have an opportunity to participate in the first significant water storage project proposed in decades. It is called the Northern Integrated Supply Project or NISP.

The decision on this project will determine in part our ability to contribute to the economic growth and the advancement of our quality of life we will have in Northern Colorado.

Generations of Colorado farmers recognized an essential requirement for sustainable food stocks for our population was the management of water. They not only recognized the need for water, they took action. They built and paid for the water systems that served Colorado for more than 100 years.

And with this water supply farmers built Colorado agriculture into a major economic force that now provides over \$17 billion in annual receipts. It represents one of the largest economic engines powering the Colorado economy.

It is an engine that serves Colorado far beyond the farm gate, generating jobs for our economy from products inputs for the ground, to crop management to food processing and retailing. And finally to the food on your plate every evening.

Water, of course, serves vital needs far beyond agriculture. And already there is more demand than supply of this precious commodity.

Demographers estimate the population of Colorado will double by the year 2050. Much of this growth will be on the Front Range. And the resource needed more than land will be water.

For more than a century, our water laws have guided us with a consistent theme. Water is for the beneficial use of all the people of Colorado. Whether one looks at the Colorado Constitution or the 1902 Reclamation Act, water belongs to - and is used for -- the common welfare of all Coloradoans.

With demand outstripping supply, an implicit requirement of this doctrine is the prerequisite of cooperation among us all.

The Northern Integrated Supply Project is a magnificent example of just such cooperation. It is a partnership among 15 communities and the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District.

Without this project, and others like it, we will see more competition rather than cooperation battling for land and water. There will be winners and losers as we abandoned the beneficial use doctrine. One will be irrigated farming, one of our major economic engines.

Rejecting this project is not an option. It is the equivalent of driving toward a cliff, accelerating at each sign that reads "cliff ahead" until its too late, except for others to observe the wreckage below and ask why they didn't see it coming.

Without the NISP project, there will be the loss of as many as 70,000 acres of Northern Colorado farmland. And with it will go a chunk of the agricultural economy supporting Colorado businesses located far beyond the farm gate.

For every farm lost on average we lose two businesses on Main Street. These are businesses that provide services on your Main Street and mine. It's not an exaggeration to say with the demise of multiple farms in an area entire communities can disappear.

More importantly we will lose essential suppliers to our

new energy economy that requires plant matter in addition to for food, feed and fiber.

The Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District undertook a difficult assignment under challenging and complex circumstances. They, along with their municipal partners, accomplished the extraordinary feat of first-rate planning for the beneficial use of our mutual resource for our mutual benefit.

We owe them our gratitude and our support for a project that will add to our legacy and our future.

Mark Sponsler is the CEO of the Colorado Corn Growers Association