

# *Northern Colorado Business Report*

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## **Farmers count on new reservoirs for survival**

*By Steve Porter*

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If the \$426 million Northern Integrated Supply Project - which already has \$5 million and more than five years of work invested in it - is shot down by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, it would have devastating consequences for Northern Colorado agriculture, farm proponents say.

“Without NISP, I think you’ll see thousands of acres (of farmland) going out of production and failing cities without that water,” said Crystal Korrey, state affairs director for the Colorado Farm Bureau.

NISP, proposed by the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, includes the construction of two new reservoirs - Glade Reservoir northwest of Fort Collins and Galeton Reservoir northeast of Greeley. The project aims to provide water for the future growth of 15 towns and ditch companies in the region while helping to preserve agriculture in the area.

But the EPA in September and October sent letters to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers criticizing several aspects of the project’s draft Environmental Impact Statement, essentially saying the project would worsen water quality problems already identified along certain seg-

ments of the Cache la Poudre and South Platte rivers.

District officials have responded by saying many of the EPA’s concerns have already been addressed and all will ultimately be resolved so the Corps can approve a final EIS and issue a permit for the project. “We feel confident every one of the issues we will be able to address,” said Carl Brouwer, the water district’s NISP project manager. “Thus far we do not see any fatal flaws.”

Brian Werner, the district’s spokesman, said NISP has gained strong support in the agriculture community and farmers and ranchers are counting on it coming to fruition.

“Basically, all of the ag organizations in the state are in support of it, so that says something right there,” he said, noting that a minimum of 40,000 acres - between 80 and 100 square miles of farmland - could be lost in the region over the next 20 years without NISP.

“I’m not saying the sky is falling, but we think this is so important for the future of agriculture in Northern Colorado,” he said.

Already selling rights

Area farms are already selling off water rights to developers and cities and towns thirsty for new water supplies to accommodate growing populations. The city of Thornton, for example, has reportedly purchased more than 100

Northern Colorado farms over the last 15 years. Without large storage and supply reservoirs like the proposed 170,000-acre-foot Glade and 40,000-acre-foot Galetton to provide irrigation in times of drought, the pace of struggling farms selling off their water rights will likely accelerate.

Robert Winter, a farmer in the Windsor area, said he's sold farmland and water rights to local municipalities to keep his ag operation going. "The municipalities have to have water and they're going to go out and buy it," he said. "Everybody's looking for a way to survive and keep farming."

Winter, a lifelong Northern Colorado resident and a member of the Weld County Farm Bureau, said he hopes the NISP proposal can overcome its critics and criticisms to provide the water that agriculture needs to continue to be viable in the northern Front Range.

"In a drought you just can't get (any water)," he said. "We need those reservoirs, because storage is the only thing that's going to help us."

And the region may be running out of opportunities to build such a massive water supply project, Winter notes. "Right now we've got cooperation to make it happen but we might not have it later on," he said. "There may not be another opportunity - period."

## Farm groups join

A broad coalition of ag organizations have gone on record in support of NISP, including Colorado Farm Bureau, the Colorado Livestock Association, Colorado Pork Producers Council, Colorado Dairy Farmers, Colorado Egg Producers and the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union.

Mark Sponsler, director of the Greeley-based

Colorado Corn Growers Association, said his organization also strongly supports NISP. Sponsler said Colorado farmers have long supported water supply projects because those projects have resulted in agriculture contributing an estimated \$17 billion annually to the state's economy.

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

Colorado Farm Bureau's Korrey agrees. "As the Front Range continues to grow, we have to be proactive to meet those needs or we will see ag slip away," she said.

Water district spokesman Werner said the days of relatively cheap Colorado-Big Thompson water are nearly gone, with no more than a seven-year supply left.

"If C-BT water isn't available, what's the next option?" he asks. "You continue to buy up farms. We don't want that to be the only option."

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