

Move could slow ag-land loss; New project could provide Windsor with needed water

By Ashley Keesis-Wood, *Windsor Beacon*, June 5, 2008

Water, water ... nowhere? And certainly without a drop to drink.

That's the possibly grim future of the Northern Colorado region as water supplies are strained by increasing municipal demands in a semi-arid climate.

But there is a possible solution, in the form of Northern Water, formerly known as the Northern Integrated Supply Project.

NISP is a collaborative effort between 15 municipalities and water districts which began in 2000. It has roots reaching back to the mid-1980s, but was formalized eight years ago. Windsor has been a player in NISP since the beginning, and the town board listened to a presentation on the project's progress Monday night at the work session.

"The project we're hoping to create will feature two reservoirs to store water from the Poudre and South Platte rivers," said Brian Werner, a public information officer for the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District.

The first reservoir, Glade, would be located northwest of Fort Collins and north of Horsetooth Reservoir. At five miles long, 260 feet deep and capable of storing 170,000 acre-feet of water, Glade would be the largest reservoir in Northern Colorado. By comparison, Horsetooth is seven miles long but holds 156,000 acre-feet.

"Glade would divert water from the Poudre River using the existing Poudre Valley Canal," said Carl Brouwer, a project manager for NISP. "There would be no new dam built on the Poudre itself; we've moved that dam off the main stem of the river."

The second reservoir, Galeton, would be located east of Ault and northeast of Greeley and hold 40,000 acre-feet of water. Water for Galeton would be diverted from the South Platte downstream of Greeley, and delivered from two irrigation companies in exchange for the Poudre River water currently used in a swap.

The project will cost an estimated \$400 million, and that cost will be born by participants in the project, in proportion to the amount of water they're requesting from NISP.

Windsor's share of water is 3,300 acre-feet, which comes to about \$33 or \$34 million. There are, Brouwer said, multiple ways to fund the project, including special bond financing, loans or up-front payment.

Windsor's goal would be to make the new growth pay for the increased water cost, according to Director of Engineering Dennis Wagner.

"We're hoping to transition from a cash-in-lieu type system to a direct water dedication," Wagner said.

In 2004, the project began an environmental impact study directed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and a preliminary report of findings was released April 30, 2008.

"Currently we're in the 90-day comment period," Werner said.

"The Corps is seeking public comment through the end of July."

There are three formal hearings coming up. The first is June 16 at the Fort Collins Hilton Hotel, the second is June 17 at the Fort Collins Senior Center and the third is June 19 at the University of Northern Colorado's Student Center in Greeley. All three start at 6 p.m.

Once the comment period ends, the Corps will study the comments and then make its final EIS study recommendation, hopefully by the end of the year, according to Werner.

If the project is approved by the Corps as presented, construction on Glade could be completed by 2015 and on Galeton by 2021.

NISP has come under fire from people concerned that it would dry up the Poudre River through Fort Collins, accelerate growth in the region, and discourage conservation.

Currently, water for Windsor is provided through the Colorado Big Thompson project, which was built in the 1940s to provide water for the region. Only about 10 percent of shares in the CBT remain.

"We're projecting those shares will be gone in about eight years, and there will be no more water available in CBT except at a tremendous cost," Brouwer said. "That's about the time we're hoping Glade will be ready."

According to the Corps' draft EIS, NISP will not increase Poudre dry periods, nor will it damage the aesthetics of the river's flow.

"Our water rights on the Poudre are very junior, and we're only looking at taking water from the river about four out of every 10 years," Werner said. "And we are willing to work to make sure water remains in the river."

During the EIS study, three alternatives to the proposal were identified: taking no action, building a reservoir near the Anheuser-Bush plant called Cactus Hill and continuing with the Galeton Reservoir or building either Glade or Cactus Hill and Galeton using agricultural transfers that would remove irrigation from an estimated 17,137 acres of agricultural lands.

"The first alternative is the worst," Brouwer said. "If we do not build NISP, we would have to accelerate agriculture dry-up."

Ag dry-up occurs when municipalities in need of water pay farmers for their irrigated farmland and then use that water for their residents.

There is also concern among NISP participants that if NISP is not built, the cost of water will at least double. An acre-foot of NISP water will cost participants about \$10,000. By way of comparison, the water cost for the CBT participants is about \$15,000.

"Without NISP, more than three-quarters of the participants will experience water shortages by 2010," Brouwer said.

NISP is not designed to replace CBT; rather, water owners in NISP would be able to augment the water rights they already have in the CBT project.

"An analogy would be a checking account," Brouwer said. "If NISP has one really good year, you can bank some of that water reserve for later years when the water supply isn't as good. The same goes for CBT, and you can manage the water, so that you're drawing more on CBT when it's having a good year and NISP is having a slower one."

Although Brouwer cautioned against making guarantees, he said he was optimistic the Corps would agree with the original proposal for NISP.

Windsor Mayor John Vazquez said he had signed a letter of support for the project and submitted it to the Army Corps for their consideration.

The other participants in NISP are the Fort Collins-Loveland Water District, Left Hand Water District, Erie, Lafayette, Morgan County Quality Water District, Severance, Central Weld County Water District, Evans, Frederick, Firestone, Dacono, Fort Lupton, Fort Morgan and Eaton.