

Colorado Water Plan may be good omen for NISP

Coloradoan

November 19, 2015

By *Jacy Marmaduke*

The final version of the [Colorado Water Plan](#), unveiled Thursday in a standing room only Denver press conference, has some interesting, if uncertain, implications for the [Northern Integrated Supply Project](#).

The [plan](#) is Colorado's first statewide attempt to confront a projected water supply shortage of 560,000 acre-feet — enough to fill Horsetooth Reservoir three and a half times — by 2050.

Sources were reluctant to speculate on whether the plan's water storage goals — adding 400,000 acre-feet of storage by 2050 and an 80 percent success rate for a group of proposed storage projects that includes NISP — mean the state will back NISP. The state cannot legally give NISP a thumbs-up until federal review of the long-debated proposal is complete.

But the pro-storage aspect of the plan, coupled with the state's suggestions for increased permitting efficiency for large-scale storage projects like NISP, means the state is not openly opposed to this kind of project. That lack of opposition on principal could bode well for Northern Water's plan to create two reservoirs yielding 40,000 acre feet of water annually to 15 participants. Most of the water would come from the Poudre River.

"They recognize the need for 400,000 additional acre-feet of storage," Northern Water general manager Eric Wilkinson said. "We feel that NISP ... would help meet a significant portion of that goal."

Colorado's government has two points of entry for NISP: The Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission and the Colorado Water Conservation Board have to review and approve a Northern Water-produced fish and wildlife mitigation plan for the project. Wilkinson said that process is in the early stages.

And the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment decides whether to grant the project a 401 certification, a safeguard measure for states to block dams and diversions if they interfere with the health of wetlands. The 401 certification process will come after — and if — the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers rules in favor of building NISP.

The Army Corps plans to release its final environmental impact statement for NISP this summer and make a final ruling sometime in 2017.

Overall, the final draft of Colorado's first-ever statewide water plan got glowing praise from many environmental advocacy groups, with a few exceptions.

The plan sets several concrete goals, including:

- Reduce the projected 2050 municipal and industrial water gap to zero acre-feet by 2030.
- Achieve 400,000 acre-feet of municipal and industrial water conservation by 2050.
- Ensure that, by 2025, three-fourths of Coloradans live in communities that have incorporated water-saving actions into land-use planning.
- Attain 400,000 acre-feet of additional water storage by 2050.

- Cover 80 percent of locally prioritized rivers with stream management plans and 80 percent of critical watersheds with watershed protection plans by 2030.
- Investigate ways to raise \$100 million annually for plan objectives starting in 2020.
- Significantly improve public awareness of water issues statewide by 2020, determined by water awareness surveys.

Groups including American Rivers, Audubon Rockies, Conservation Colorado, the Environmental Defense Fund and Western Resource Advocates praised the plan for its urban conservation goal, river health focus, collaborative nature and action-oriented methodology.

"There's a lot of kumbaya," said Western Resource Advocates' water policy manager Drew Beckwith, who also commended the plan's "higher hurdles" for controversial trans-mountain diversion projects and push for funding to meet water goals. The plan projects a \$20 billion funding shortfall during the next 30 years but estimates that water providers will meet most of it.

Not everyone was singing. Gary Wockner, executive director of Save the Colorado and Save the Poudre, called the plan "a missed opportunity" to promote sustainability and conservation in favor of dams and diversions. And he fears the plan's conservation and river health goals will "sit on a shelf" because the Colorado Water Conservation Board lacks legal power to enforce them.

In an emailed statement, WildEarth Guardians' Wild Rivers Program Director Jen Pelz said the plan isn't all "unicorns and rainbows."

"The plan tries to be all things to all people," she wrote. "To meet the projected 'gap' in Colorado water supply and demand, all water users need to be at the table in order to solve the problem. Even though agriculture uses 80 percent of the water from our state, somehow water leasing and acquisition programs to make up shortfalls or put water back in our rivers are not strongly committed to in the final plan."

Rather, the plan sets a goal to share at least 50,000 acre-feet of agricultural water with municipalities via voluntary alternative transfer methods by 2030. "Voluntary alternative transfer methods" are strategies to avoid the "buy-and-dry" practice in which cities purchase land from farmers and switch the water associated with it from agricultural to municipal use.

Carlyle Currier, vice president of the Colorado Farm Bureau and vice chairman of the Colorado Agricultural Water Alliance, said the absence of a conservation goal for agriculture was intentional. Agriculture focuses on efficient use of existing water supply rather than conservation, which Currier described as "doing less with less."

"That's not really an option with agriculture," he said. "If you're using less water, you're producing less crops. Is that really what our goal should be? Producing less?"

Now that the plan is completed, the Colorado Water Conservation Board will oversee the completion of the plan's critical action items. The board will provide annual progress reports to the governor and the Colorado General Assembly.

"The plan (coming out) does not mean the end of the process by any stretch of the imagination," Currier said. "It's the beginning, really."

Reporter Jacy Marmaduke covers environment and breaking news for the Coloradoan. Follow her on Twitter at @jacymarmaduke.

NISP timeline

2004: U.S. Army Corps begins the federal permitting process for NISP.

2008: The Army Corps releases its draft environmental impact statement evaluating the environmental effects of NISP and the viability of three alternative projects.

2009: After complaints that the DEIS is insufficient, the Army Corps announces it will prepare a supplemental draft environmental impact statement, projected to be finished in 2010.

June 2015: The Army Corps releases the SDEIS.

September 2015: The public comment period ends for the SDEIS.

Summer 2016: Projected release of the final environmental impact statement.

2017: Projected release of the Army Corps' record of decision for NISP.