

Daily Camera

Feds' approval of expanded Gross Reservoir panned in Boulder County

Environmental advocates may pursue legal action to stop project

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For the Camera

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a permit Thursday to Denver Water for its long-planned expansion project at Gross Reservoir, seen in this file photo.

(Cliff Grassmick / Staff photographer)

Environmental advocates Saturday said they are inching toward a lawsuit after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' announced a decision to grant a permit to Denver Water's expansion of Boulder County's Gross Reservoir.

The [proposed project](#) would increase the dam wall by 131 feet to triple the capacity of the reservoir. A lawsuit by Save the Colorado — a group dedicated to protecting and restoring the Colorado River — could potentially derail or halt construction plans altogether.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gave a permit to Denver Water for their expansion project at Gross Dam on Thursday.

"We put in a long, technical document about the alternatives that they could use into the permitting process," Gary Wockner of Save the Colorado said. "That'll be one of the items upon which we will likely file a lawsuit."

According to [Denver Water's website](#), the expansion project is part of a comprehensive strategy "to meet future customers' needs" by improving water dependability. However, Save the Colorado alleged that Denver Water's water usage has gone down and they have violated the National Environmental Policy Act and the Clean Water Act as a result.

"They claim in their application for the entire EIS process that went on for 14 years that they needed more water," Wockner said. "The actual data proves that they do not need more water."

In addition, Wockner said that the project would divert water from the already depleted Colorado River to fill the reservoir without considering the alternatives.

"There's lots of alternatives that they can use to address those vulnerabilities including buying water from farmers on the Front Range including building some pipelines between their south system and their north system," Wockner said. "It all gets a little wonky, but they have alternatives as opposed to draining the Colorado River and doing all this environmental damage to Boulder County."

"We're going to strongly claim that they did not pick the LEDPA (least environmentally damaging practicable alternative)," Wockner added. "I can't think of a single good thing to say about that project," said climate scientist David Bahr, who lives in the Aspen Meadows subdivision outside Nederland.

[Save the Colorado](#) members claim the project would have a negative impact on the people living around Gross Reservoir, despite Denver Water's plans to quarry on site.

Bahr — who lives near the impacted area — is prepared to take drastic measures to avoid the construction.

"I'm moving," Bahr said. "I talked about that this morning with my wife, I don't think anyone really understands what it means to have 24 hours-per-day of blasting going on near my house and thousands of other houses up here."

"Construction noise, according to the EIS, is permitted to be as loud as downtown Washington, D.C.," Bahr added, alluding to the project's federally mandated environmental impact statement.

Though the project has been in the works for over 14 years, Bahr said that Nederland residents are in for a rude awakening.

"It's an environmental disaster in one of the greenest counties in the nation and people in Boulder have no idea that it's going to happen," Bahr said. "They're not going to know what hit them over the head."

Although Bahr may disapprove of the plan as a resident, he also believes that the wrong choices were made based on scientific considerations.

"Much of it just feels underhanded. In the face of climate change, I do not know what they are thinking," Bahr said. "I really don't think they have employed real climate scientists to look at this. If they had, they'd have been told, 'Oh wow, that's just a crazy idea, you don't have the water to do that.'"

While the opposing groups may never see eye-to-eye, Wockner and other residents are ready for a fight.

"It's going to take a while for this to play out in court," Wockner said. "The Colorado River is going to get its day in court, which it deserves because it is the state's namesake and deserves the best defense we can give it."