

Utilities' water plan wins bureau's favor

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THE GAZETTE

Colorado Springs Utilities scored a victory Friday when the federal government agreed the city's proposal for piping water from Pueblo Reservoir is the best of seven options.

The Bureau of Reclamation's draft Environmental Impact Statement identified a plan to pipe water from the reservoir along Interstate 25 to the city's northeast side as the "preferred alternative."

It concluded the city's Southern Delivery System wouldn't damage the environment any more than other alternatives but would cost less and require the lowest amount of energy, "resulting in the lowest greenhouse gas emissions of any alternative."

The bureau's endorsement of the city's plan suggests Utilities will get the green light for the \$1 billion project late this year or in early 2009.

The city needs federal approval, because the bureau operates Pueblo Reservoir, where the city wants a 40-year storage contract.

The bureau's environmental study, required under the National Environmental Policy Act, looked at 10 criteria in the seven alternatives, including a "no action" option.

Those are: surface water flow, surface water quality, channel stability and morphology, sedimentation, water rights, fish and other aquatic life, wetlands, wildlife, socio-economic conditions, and recreation resources.

The bureau found that "all alternatives would have adverse environmental effects" but concluded all six action alternatives are "reasonable."

That's music to the ears of Springs Utilities' officials because it translates to flexibility, which is key considering the city's chosen plan faces opposition that could force it to side step Pueblo County.

Pueblo County commissioners have authority under land-use rules to regulate the pipeline's path through Pueblo County. Some Puebloans blame Colorado Springs for polluting and flooding Fountain Creek, the repository for treated wastewater for the additional water supplies.

Fountain Creek merges with the Arkansas River east of Pueblo.

Pueblo County commissioners have refused to comment, citing their potential involvement in regulation of the pipeline's construction.

Colorado Springs Vice Mayor Larry Small termed Pueblo County “the biggest obstacle” for the pipeline and predicted the city would soon file a land-use application. But Utilities project director John Fredell wouldn’t confirm that, saying only that it is an option.

Fredell said it’s good news the bureau didn’t discount an option to run the pipeline from the Arkansas in Fremont County, avoiding Pueblo County. The city is also working on that project.

Utilities water chief Bruce McCormick said the city has factored environmental mitigation into project costs.

“Yeah, there’s going to be impacts,” McCormick said. “But we don’t think there’s anything in there that says they can’t be mitigated. The idea that all six (action alternatives) could be constructed without undue impact is a great thing and allows us flexibility.”

The bureau’s draft environmental statement found:

WETLANDS

The city’s plan would affect 32.2 acres of wetlands, waters of the United States and riparian resources. That’s about the same as several alternatives but substantially more than one option that would affect 8.1 acres. The impacts would require temporary and permanent on-site restoration and on- and off-site creation of wetlands to compensate.

VEGETATION

Of all the plans, the city’s plan would have the greatest effect on grassland, shrubland and woodland, affecting 337 acres. Also, the plan would destroy about 5 percent of dwarf milkweed, considered “imperiled” in Colorado, endangering the plant’s genetic diversity.

WILDLIFE

The project would hurt threatened and endangered species, some negligibly, by the permanent and temporary loss of habitat and displacement or disturbance of breeding, feeding and sheltering.

The areas at issue are potential habitat for federally listed species: Canada lynx, Preble’s meadow jumping mouse and Mexican spotted owl.

“All alternatives would permanently affect between 1,278 and 2,410 acres of vegetation communities, which would generally contribute to moderate to major overall adverse effects on wildlife and migratory birds,” the agency said.

RECREATION

The city plan’s impact on recreation, notably boating on the Arkansas downstream of Pueblo Dam, would bring “minor to moderate benefits,” while the Fremont County option would result in “minor adverse effects to those opportunities,” the report said.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

The city’s proposal would cause Colorado Springs’ residential water rates to more than double by 2015, the agency found. The city’s project partners, Fountain and Security, would see their rates rise 63 percent and 171 percent, respectively.

The bureau used state and local forecasts to project Colorado Springs' annual growth at 1.2 percent between 2000 and 2030, to 518,000 residents; Fountain's at 3.7 percent growth to 53,000 residents, and Security's at 1.4 percent growth to 27,000 residents. Pueblo West, which has a small part of the project, was forecast at 3.5 percent growth to 47,000 residents.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

The city's plan would affect 84 sites eligible or potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. One alternative was found to affect a lower number.

Public comments will be considered in revising the draft into a final document, which will be released late this year. A record of decision is expected in early 2009.

If approved, the city will start building the line in 2009, with it going into service in 2012.

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