

Smoother sailing for once-contentious project

June 23, 2009

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THE GAZETTE

When it was up for federal approval, Colorado Springs Utilities' proposed water pipeline from Pueblo Reservoir drew more than 400 comments for and against the project.

Times have changed.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is considering the last major permit for the Southern Delivery System, under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, because pipeline construction will impact 14.2 acres of streams and wetlands.

The public comment period ended Friday, and 13 people and organizations - 12 against, one in favor - submitted comments, a possible sign that people see the once-controversial project as a foregone conclusion, since the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and Pueblo County have both approved it.

Van Truan, from the Corps of Engineers Pueblo office, said he was surprised by the low number of comments, given the previous acrimony over the project.

The \$1.1 billion pipeline will carry 78 million gallons a day from Pueblo Reservoir to a new reservoir southeast of Colorado Springs. More treated effluent will flow down Fountain Creek.

The pipeline was, at one point, controversial in Pueblo County, where some blame Colorado Springs for flooding, erosion and water quality problems on Fountain Creek and worry that sending more treated effluent downstream will exacerbate the problems.

Colorado Springs, as part of the Pueblo County approval, agreed to spend \$50 million on improvement projects along the creek by funding the new Fountain Creek Watershed District and \$75 million to upgrade its own wastewater or water-reuse systems and to dredge the creek at the Pueblo levees at a cost of \$2 million.

Truan said the Corps will not release the comments until a permit is issued or denied. The Corps is expected make a decision on the permit within 120 days, Truan said. He said most of the comments were similar to those voiced earlier in the process, so the agency has not decided if it will hold a hearing on the permit.

"A lot them refer to things that are really not in the scope of our permit, but beyond that," Truan said.

"What we're looking for is new information and not just a comment session," Truan said of a hearing. "We want good new information, and that's why we don't do them very often."

Some who commented released their remarks. The Sierra Club and the Rocky Mountain Environmental Labor Coalition called on the Corps to hold a public hearing. The Pueblo West Metropolitan District, a partner in the pipeline, asked the Corps to deny a permit because it wants to slow the approval process while the district tries to resolve a conflict with Pueblo County over flow guarantees through a whitewater park on the Arkansas River.

Pueblo County District Attorney Bill Thiebaut, who has sued Colorado Springs over sewage spills and opposed the pipeline, urged the Corps to consider the cumulative impacts of the project and possible alternatives to the pipeline.

"The Corps must require CSU to analyze other less environmentally harmful alternatives, such as water conservation strategies, water recycling and reuse and land use restrictions," Thiebaut wrote in his comments, which his office provided to the media.

"We've been working with the (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) and the Army Corps and the Bureau of Reclamation on the cumulative impacts of the project and alternatives for a long time, and we feel like we've analyzed all reasonable alternatives," said Keith Riley, SDS project planning and permitting manager, Tuesday .

He said Thiebaut's concerns are not new and were addressed in the federal and county approval processes.

Riley declined to respond to other pipeline comments because he had not yet seen them. Utilities officials will make a recommendation to the Colorado Springs City Council next month on the timeline for construction and exact route the pipeline will follow.