

Senate infrastructure bill's Western water provisions worthy of passage



John Locher / AP

People take pictures of Lake Mead near Hoover Dam at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Friday, Aug. 13, 2021, in Arizona. The bathtub ring of light minerals shows the high water mark of the reservoir which has fallen to record lows.

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In the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill that is working its way through Congress, Senate lawmakers took two significant

steps to ease the drain on the West's dwindling water supply.

One, for which Nevadans have Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto to thank, was to include \$450 million in grants for large-scale water recycling projects. Cortez Masto added the funding with an eye toward fueling development of a regional recycled water plant that would provide drinking water to more than a half-million homes in Southern California and Nevada.

The other step was a matter of addition by subtraction, with lawmakers from the Colorado River Lower Basin uniting to reject an attempt by Utah to clear the way for a proposed pipeline to spur development in the St. George area.

Both of these items are greatly needed, and the House should move urgently to approve them.

Although the plant in Southern California will be hundreds of miles away, it will directly benefit the Las Vegas Valley. Under a partnership between the Southern Nevada Water Authority and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the SNWA could invest up to \$750 million for the \$3.4 billion project and get a share of California's allotment of water from the Colorado River in return. That additional allotment could be up to 30,000 acre-feet per year, which would boost Southern Nevada's water supply by 10%.

Meanwhile, the plant would provide up to 150 million gallons

of treated water per day for Southern Nevada, reducing the region's demand on the Colorado River.

Speaking of reducing demand, the Senate also did so in scuttling an amendment by Utah Sen. Mike Lee to fast-track the St. George pipeline.

That disastrous project would drain 86,000 acre-feet of water per year from Lake Powell to St. George for crops, lawns and expanded development. This is a massive amount of water — it's about one-third of the amount Southern Nevada uses annually.

It also would be going to a place that, unlike Las Vegas, has thumbed its nose at the need to conserve water. The average home in St. George uses 306 gallons per person per day, which is about three times the amount of use in Las Vegas.

Lee's amendment would have given states oversight authority over environmental review of major projects, something the federal government currently does.

Killing the amendment was the right thing to do not just because of the St. George pipeline, but because it would have thrown the door wide open for states to stick straws in the river without concern to how they affected other states.

With both Lake Powell and Lake Mead reaching historically low levels this year, Lee's amendment was completely

irresponsible.

It runs 180-degrees counter to what's needed: A presidential commission to work with states on an emergency basis to develop a long-range water-sharing plan. The panel's review should include distribution policies, water covenants and water use projections in pursuit of policies to reduce the draw on the river while boosting water conservation, recapture, purification and reuse.

Keep in mind, the Western water crisis isn't some far-off threat — it's playing out in real time before our eyes as communities are literally running out of water.

Thousands of wells have dried up in Oregon and California, leaving small cities without adequate reserves and forcing families to shut down farms and relocate. Agriculture producers throughout the West are being hit particularly hard, decimating the yields of their crops and forcing them to leave fields unplanted and sell off cattle. The disruption is causing shockwaves in the food supply and distribution system, adding to the factors that have driven up consumer prices for groceries. In California, where state water officials reported that systems serving more than 130,000 people were likely to have "critical water supply issues by the end of August," some communities are already feeling the pinch.

"Visitors to the tourist haven of Mendocino, for example, have

found hotels with their lobby restrooms closed, formerly green lawns turning to straw and signs reading 'Severe drought. Please conserve water,' " The San Francisco Chronicle recently reported.

The recent Senate actions won't solve the water crisis — nothing but a multijurisdictional, multifaceted approach will — but they're moves in the right direction. We commend Cortez-Masto for her leadership on water-recycling projects, and the Lower Basin delegates for banding together against the Lake Powell pipeline.