

# Rather than draining Lake Powell, Utah should give conservation a try

Felicia Fonseca / AP

This June 21, 2015, photo shows Lake Powell behind Glen Canyon Dam near Page, Ariz.

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Our neighbors in Utah are at it again, responding to their growing need for water by trying to grab more instead of conserving their current supply.

A new analysis of a pipeline project that would tap a distant aquifer to serve Cedar City shows that the community would be better served by conserving rather than sucking it out of the underground source. The project has a lot in common with a proposed pipeline that would drain 28 billion gallons of water from Lake Powell to serve St. George, a notoriously water-wasteful community.

Native American tribes, water conservation advocates and others in Nevada adamantly oppose both of the Utah pipeline projects, and with good reason. Each would put our state's dwindling water supply at increased risk.

In Cedar City, the Central Iron County Water Conservancy District wants to build 70 miles of pipeline at a cost of \$270 million to tap into an aquifer in Pine Valley, which is about 30 miles east of the Nevada state line as the crow flies.

Justifiably, Nevadans in the area are concerned that the pipeline would affect other nearby aquifers that supply their communities. Given that climate change is intensifying the longstanding drought in the Southwest, that's a valid concern.

Last week, water conservationists issued an analysis showing two major problems with the Iron County district's plan. It's based on an overestimation of demand, and it could be avoided if the district stepped up conservation. As stated in the project analysis, the district has "some of the weakest water conservation goals in the American West" — specifically, it plans to reduce its water use only 28% over 50 years, a pace of just 0.56% per year. By contrast, the Southern Nevada Water District reduced its use 47% in just 18 years starting in 2002 among its Las Vegas customers.

While Iron County is paying lip service to conservation at a residential level, their efforts don't go much beyond limiting the size of grass-turf yards.

Iron County should go much further. Conservation helps everyone involved — it saves ratepayers the cost of building

the pipeline, and it saves the water supplies of surrounding areas from being impacted.

It's the neighborly, responsible thing to do. Better yet, Iron County should follow the lead of Tucson, Ariz., which conserves to the point of having a surplus of Colorado River water that the community uses to recharge aquifers around the city. Those aquifers essentially become massive water stores, with the higher water level providing such benefits as keeping individual wells from failing.

The Lake Powell pipeline, by contrast, would divert water from downstream users in Las Vegas and elsewhere to serve another community that hasn't taken serious steps toward conservation.

If you've read any news about Lake Powell lately, you know the St. George pipeline would be insane. The lake, which provides water to 40 million people, has hit a record-low level. It's down so far that observers are worried it could dip below the cutoff level for Glen Canyon Dam, which provides electricity for up to 5.8 million homes and businesses in the Southwest.

"We're kind of in some uncharted territory, socially and economically," Justin Mankin, who helps lead the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Drought Task Force, told CNN. "It's totally within reason to expect that the

next couple of weeks or so for (Lake Powell) to fall below the critical level."

Granted, communities in Utah and throughout the region are in greater need for water due to population growth.

It's only fair to note that Southern Nevada, in trying to provide for its own growth, engaged in a decades-long project to pipe water from rural ranches to Las Vegas before shelving that plan in 2020. Our leadership also is backing a proposal to open more than 30,000 acres of land in southern Clark County to development, which has drawn criticism over how it would affect our water supply even though the plan would also provide environmental protections for more than 2 million acres of land.

But the difference between our region and Utah is that conservation has been a core element of our water policies for decades.

Southern Nevada was ahead of the game in treating and reusing our wastewater, paying homeowners to convert grass to low-impact landscaping, banning purely ornamental grass turf and adopting other conservation methods. We also understand that our water supply must be treated as a regional issue that must be addressed cooperatively. That thinking is reflected in the Southern Nevada Water Authority's decision to help fund a wastewater treatment

operation in Southern California that will reduce that area's water usage and ease the burden on the Colorado River.

Utah, on the other hand, acts like there's an endless supply of water, and that they can take all they want to maintain green-grass yards and water crops that would best be grown elsewhere.

Until our neighbors become more responsible in using the water they have, Nevada will oppose their efforts to get more.