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Feds release environmental analysis on possible Powell pipeline routes. Critics point to flaws.



(Brian Maffly | Tribune file photo) Bullfrog Marina on Lake Powell in Utah on Nov. 29, 2018.



By Brian Maffly

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Federal officials released a long-awaited environmental review Monday of Utah's proposed Lake Powell pipeline, a controversial billion-dollar water project that would serve the mushrooming St. George area, opening a public comment period through Sept. 6.

The Utah Division of Water Resources has spent 14 years and \$35 million designing and studying the 140-mile-long pipeline that would move up to 86,000 acre-feet of water a year through a 69-inch-diameter pipe across northern Arizona and southern Utah.

Critics of the project immediately questioned the quality of the analysis conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Zach Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council, for example, rejected the bureau's assertion that the pipeline would cost between \$1.4 billion and \$1.5 billion to build, and \$312 million a year to operate.

"They are using 12-year-old estimates," Frankel said. "Even the [Utah] legislative auditor said it would cost \$2.2 billion and that was without hydro."

The 140-mile pipeline was previously conceived as an energy project with several hydroelectric-generating features, which were dropped last year to simplify a project fraught with political and

environmental complexities.

Drawing on comparisons with other projects, Frankel's group contends the pipeline would cost \$3 billion, which would be financed by Utah taxpayers and paid back by the Washington County Water Conservancy District through a combination of water rate hikes, property tax revenues and impact fees.

The 313-page draft environmental impact statement, or EIS, posted Monday analyzes two possible pipeline alignments and a "no action" alternative. The two alignments both begin at an intake on the bottom of Lake Powell near Page, Ariz., and end at Sand Hollow Reservoir near St. George.

The so-called "Southern Alternative" would travel south of the Kaibab Indian Reservation outside Fredonia, Ariz., while the "the Highway Alternative" would take a more direct route through the reservation inhabited by the Kaibab Band of Paiute Indians, following Arizona 389.

The Bureau of Reclamation will host online public meetings July 8 and 9. Details will be posted on the EIS webpage, along with instructions for submitting public comments.

“We are pleased to reach this important milestone and appreciate all those who have contributed to this extensive review,” said Todd Adams, Division of Water Resources director. “We invite the public to read the study and participate in the public comment period. The Lake Powell Pipeline is an essential water delivery project and plays a critical role in delivering a second reliable water source to southern Utah.”

The southern route features three sub-alternatives, one of which passes through Kanab Creek Area of Critical Environmental Concern, or ACEC. That alternative would require further analysis to change the ACEC’s land-use restrictions to allow a pipeline right of way or change its boundaries.

Utah and Washington County water officials say the pipeline, authorized by the Legislature back in 2006, is needed to meet future water needs for the rapidly growing southwestern corner of the state. The diversion would use less than 6% of Utah’s 1.4 million acre-foot allocation of the Colorado River’s flow.

Critics argue the analysis fails to adequately consider how the warming climate and persistent drought are expected to reduce flows on the Colorado.

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“It’s appalling that Utah officials and the Trump administration are willing to suck the Colorado River basin dry to water lawns and golf courses in St. George,” said Ryan Beam, a campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Clearly these rivers are drying up, and we must protect declining river flows to sustain fish, wildlife and downstream communities. But instead Utah wants to spend billions to support sprawl while ignoring the mega-drought, climate change and overallocation of the river.”

This story will be updated.



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