

Lake Powell pipeline will 'make the river angry,' Southern Paiutes warn as feds release analysis

Any potential alignment of the [Lake Powell pipeline](#) would pass through lands that hold spiritual and cultural significance to Southern Paiutes, who fear the project would jeopardize their culture and upset the balance of nature.

One alternative route passes through Arizona's Kaibab Indian Reservation and the other, preferred by the water project's Utah proponents, skirts the reservation around its southern borders by following an existing utility corridor.

According to documents released Monday as part of the pipeline's long-awaited environmental analysis, the [Kaibab Band of Paiute Indians](#) sees significant problems not only with both alignments, but also with the entire project sought by Utah water officials to divert some of the Colorado River to feed the St. George area's growing demand.

The tribe's filings are attached as supplements to a draft environmental impact statement prepared by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in coordination with several other

federal agencies. These documents speak to the reverence Native Americans hold for elements of nature.

"Among these are the Colorado River, the veins of Mother Earth moving the essential element water. At creation, the Colorado River's place and purpose was defined. The [Lake Powell pipeline] project proposes to remove the Colorado River from its appropriate place and to move it elsewhere to be used in different ways," tribal officials wrote in one filing [titled "Environmental Justice."](#) "This action will make the river angry and confused, the results of which are unknown but clearly a source of imbalance in the world."

Utah has a legal right to some of the Colorado's flow and intends to put 6% of its share to use by piping it across northern Arizona and southern Utah for use in Washington County, whose population is expected to more than double by 2060 to nearly half a million.

The Washington County Water Conservancy District and the Utah Division of Water Resources have spent 12 years and \$35 million designing and studying the proposed 140-mile-long pipeline, which would move up to 86,000 acre-feet of water a year through a 69-inch-diameter buried steel pipe.

The release of the EIS is an important milestone in the controversial project, opening a public comment period through Sept. 8.

"We invite the public to read the study and participate in the public comment period," said Todd Adams, Division of Water Resources director. "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 Bureau of Reclamation will host online public meetings July 8 and July 9. Details will be posted on [the EIS webpage](#), along with instructions for submitting comments.

Environmental groups, which have fought the project since its inception, pounced on the quality of the analysis released Monday.

Zach Frankel, executive director of the [Utah Rivers Council](#), for one, 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.](#)"

That estimate from the state audit last year reflects the cost of the pipeline adjusted for inflation along with hydropower components that were later pulled from the project.

The pipeline previously was conceived as an energy initiative with several [hydroelectric-generating features, most of 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 water district through a combination of water rate hikes, property tax revenues and impact fees.

Critics also argue the analysis fails to adequately consider how the [warming climate and persistent drought](#) are expected to reduce flows on the Colorado.

"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."

The [313-page EIS](#), along with hundreds of pages of supporting documents, analyzes impacts tied to the pipeline and its associated facilities. These include the intake apparatus at Glen Canyon Dam; four booster pumping stations to propel the water up 2,000 feet of elevation; six inline hydropower stations needed to lower

pressures as water tumbles downhill at speeds of 5.5 feet per second, or 3.8 mph; 71 miles of transmission lines; a 1 million gallon storage tank to help regulate pressures; and “turnouts” near [Johnson Canyon in Kane County](#) and near Hildale to offload water at future times if needed by those communities.

Marked as confidential are 36 pages from an EIS appendix that details the project’s plan of development. The were redacted from public disclosure due to security concerns, according to the water district.

The two alternative 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 preferred “southern alternative” would travel south of the Kaibab Indian Reservation outside Fredonia, Ariz., while the “highway alternative” would take a more direct route through the reservation inhabited by the Kaibab Band, following Arizona 389.

The latter route might be seven miles shorter and \$47 million less costly to build, but it also would disturb areas where Native Americans historically buried their dead, said Brock Belnap, associate general manager for the Washington County Water Conservancy District. The southern path would avoid thorny jurisdictional issues that

would arise from crossing 15 miles of tribal land.

“The highway alignment, which goes right through the middle of the reservation, is more likely to have us encounter potential gravesites,” Belnap said Monday. “So even though there may be increased numbers of other types of ethnographic resources on the southern [alignment], the type on the highway alignment, where you actually may disturb graves or [human] remains, are far more expensive, difficult and time consuming to mitigate.”

The soils along the southern route are better suited for burying a pipeline, said Joel Williams, who oversees the project for the Division of Water Resources.

“There’s actually fewer plant species impacts by going around [the reservation]. There are some endangered plants that are only found along the highway alignment,” Williams said. “There are so many unknowns. A highway has gone through there, but now we’re going to put in a pipeline. To bury a 69-inch-diameter pipeline, you need a pretty deep trench. And we know that as you excavate, you’re going to find more things.”

While it avoids the reservation, however, the southern alignment would disturb sites holding spiritual importance to the Southern Paiutes, according to the tribe’s filings. These locations, such as the Ghost Dance site, Elephant

Foot, Indian Knoll, which features a solar observatory, a "prophecy area," and Moonshine Spring, are woven together in the designated Kanab Creek Traditional Cultural District. The Paiutes' Milk Mountain pilgrimage route passes through the area affected by the project.

The proposal has caused "continued psychological stress" to the Southern Paiutes, who are concerned construction could harm their religion and society. A key worry is that it could block access to some places and disrupt transmission of cultural practices and identity from older to younger generations.

"These are the lands of Creation where the Southern Paiute people were placed in mutual relationships with the world around them," the tribe wrote, "and given a birthright responsibility to use appropriately the natural resources and protect them and themselves from harm."