

Nevada Stakeholders Oppose Utah's Lake Powell Pipeline Project

Utter the word “pipeline,” and you’ll likely see heads raise and disagreements arise.

But one proposed water pipeline project in Utah has forged some unlikely allies in opposition.

Last week, six states that rely on the Colorado River asked the federal Bureau of Reclamation to stop its ongoing review of the Lake Powell Pipeline.

“We actually look at that letter as very promising, in the sense that, a lot of these states are wanting to work with the state of Utah in good faith. They are not asking for this project to be killed,” said Zachary Renstrom, the general manager of the Washington County Water Conservancy District.

He said the states that are opposed would just like more research done about the project, and they’re willing to discuss it because they know the community needs the water.

That is not how a coalition of conservationists and

government agencies opposed to the pipeline see it.

Kyle Roerink, executive director of Great Basin Water Network, said it was startling to see so many different groups, that usually are not united, come together to oppose the project during the public comment period on the project's draft environmental impact statement.

"It just exemplifies what a boondoggle this is and all of us were saying a lot of the same things," he said.

The project would pipe water from Lake Powell to St. George. Utah state officials say it's a necessary water supply for one of the fastest-growing regions in the country.

Lake Powell serves as one of the Colorado River's biggest reservoirs, along with Lake Mead. Seven states and parts of Mexico depend on the river's water for everything from agriculture to municipal needs. Its uses are split up amidst a complicated -- and delicate -- web of water laws.

Most of those laws are based on the original Colorado River Compact, which was signed in the 1920s. For Roerink and others opposed to the pipeline, that is the root of the problem.

"I think we all know that the Colorado River Compact is inherently flawed, and that the original sin of the compact,

essentially, is based on hydrology that was an anomaly," he said.

Roerink said the compact is based on river flows that were much higher than normal. In addition, climate change has reduced the flows in the river. He said by some estimates the river has lost close to a trillion gallons of annual flow, since 1906.

Some outlooks, he noted, show the river will lose double that by the end of this century.

"The water Washington County wants is just not available and conservation is their only option," he said.

Under the compact, Utah can take up to 1.7 million acre-feet annually. However, Renstrom notes the state takes under a million and this project would only bump it up to 1.1 million.

"This is just kind of what Utah promised to use, and we're just going to start using a portion of that," he said.

Plus, he said Utah has a "progressive plan" when it comes to dealing with water loss.

"Even though we have this full right to take a certain amount of water, we haven't taken it in the past, and even with our allocation portion of it, we're still planning on adding a good

buffer in there for any type of climate changes or variabilities on the river," he said.

Roenrink said it is incorrect for Southern Utah to say it has the right to the water. He said there are state and federal hoops to jump through to get that water.

He said this is one of those cases where Southern Utah can't get what it wants, but it can get what it needs through conservation.

"St. George is using more than double per capita of what communities like Las Vegas are using every day. So, they're above 300 gallons per capita per day. Vegas is down at 120," he said.

Besides using more water, Roerink said the Utah community is not doing enough to encourage turf removal or water reclamation facilities, especially compared to other users of the river - like Las Vegas.

Renstrom disagreed. He said the differences in water use is based on how Utah measures it, compared with other states.

"The state of Utah has very, very aggressive approach for measuring and accounting for all water. Where other states don't do that," he said.

For example, if someone uses the shower in Las Vegas and uses 20 gallons, he said, the water use is not counted because the water goes down the drain and is cleaned and recycled back into Lake Mead.

Utah, on the other hand, does count that water plus some extra gallons.

"That's the problem when people start looking at gallons per day per person that's kind of a bad way to look at it or measure water use and that's why even Southern Nevada Water Authority has been very critical of using that as a way to measure water use," he said.

Renstrom doesn't believe it is a good comparison if the other side is using a method that has been widely criticized.

When comparing apples to apples, he said St. George uses about the same amount of water as other municipalities.

He also noted that they haven't had to pay people in St. George to remove grass because they're just doing it on their own.

For his part, Roerink called Renstrom's arguments, "tired talking points," and he said that communities in Utah are not implementing conservation efforts at the same level as other communities.

"When you look at what everybody else is doing, they can't say with a straight face that they are working in good faith," he said.

Plus, the area's pipeline efforts are going against everything every other river user is doing currently.

"They want to take more water out. Everybody else is trying to keep more water in," he said.

Roerink said what makes the St. George pipeline project talks "especially galling" is the timing. States involved in the Colorado River Compact are supposed to begin talks about a new guiding framework to manage the river starting in January.

"I think last week was a big signal that it's clearly going to blow that all up," he said.

Kyle Roerink, executive director, Great Basin Water Network; **Zachary Renstrom**, general manager, Washington County Water Conservancy District