

Why some in Nevada see Utah pipeline plan as 'first salvo in coming water wars'

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Lake Powell isn't in Southern Nevada. Rather, it's about four hours away by car in southern Utah.

But some environmentalists say the water consumption of St. George, Utah, and neighboring communities could have a direct and deleterious impact on the Las Vegas water supply.

The link is the Colorado River, and the kink is the proposed Lake Powell Pipeline, a water delivery system to support expected growth in Southern Utah by drawing from the Lake Powell reservoir straddling the Arizona-Utah border.

Water activists like Kyle Roerink, executive director of the Baker-based Great Basin Water Network, label Lake Powell as the upriver twin sister of Lake Mead — if it's happening there, it's happening here. Water out of Lake Powell is water out of Lake Mead; water out of Lake Mead is water out of Vegas.

Roerink offers a grim then blunt assessment of the

Colorado's capacity as-is.

Since 1906, diversion, climate change and drought have taken 3 million acre-feet — equivalent to about 978 billion gallons — out of the Colorado, which flows roughly 1,450 miles from the Rocky Mountains to northern Mexico's Gulf of California. Another 3 million acre-feet could be lost by the end of the 21st century.

That's not counting the up-to 86,000 acre-feet Utah wants to tap into annually through the pipeline.

"The water that Utah wants," Roerink said, "only exists on paper."

The proposed pipeline would stretch from Lake Powell, near Glen Canyon Dam in Page, Ariz., to the Sand Hollow Reservoir near St. George to benefit rapidly expanding Washington County. The project would cover about 140 miles of buried pipe, five pump stations and six hydroelectric generation facilities at an estimated cost of \$1 billion to \$1.9 billion.

The Utah Board of Water Resources says the project enhances the water supply for Washington County, which is expected to add more than 295,000 people by 2060, according to projections by the University of Utah. That maintains momentum built up over the last 20 years, which

saw the county grow from a population of about 90,000 in 2000 to 138,000 in 2010 to about 170,000 people today, according to the U.S. Census.

St. George, about two hours northeast of Las Vegas and an hour west of the towering copper walls of Zion National Park, is the county seat and largest city, a mild desert town along the Virgin River.

The Virgin River, a tributary of the Colorado River, is the area's current water source. And it's not enough.

According to a draft environmental impact statement for the project prepared by the federal Bureau of Reclamation, "a more diverse and secure water supply is needed to mitigate vulnerabilities to unexpected demand and supply scenarios and ensure reliable water deliveries into the future."

Washington County Water Conservation District spokeswoman Karry Rathje said every Great Basin state has an equal legal right to use their shares, and Utah's development won't impact other states' allocations. She added that the Lake Powell water will only be taken as needed, and not at the full 86,000-acre-feet capacity until about 2050.

Brock Belnap, assistant general manager for the pipeline at the Washington County Water Conservation District, said

Washington County has already cut its water use by 30% in the past 20 years and plans to conserve further, but conservation alone doesn't create more water.

"We have a fixed pie and we can conserve by cutting the slices smaller and smaller, but eventually the slices are so small they don't cover the population," he said.

Washington County says the pipeline is the only project that can meet its needs, uses only a small portion of its unused rights, and conservation alone won't meet future demand.

The area, simply, is running out of water, Belnap said.

Washington County Water Conservation District General Manager Zachary Renstrom said the area's growth is the fastest in the nation.

"Natural growth and in-migration will not automatically cease," he said in a statement backing the pipeline. "There is no convenient switch that can be flipped to stop growth. Instead we must responsibly plan for and manage what is currently happening to ensure a high quality of life for us and those who will follow."

St. George Mayor Jon Pike said in his own statement that the city needs the project online in the next decade. Belnap said that's the goal.

Belnap said Utah state engineers say there is in fact more

reliable water in the state, upwards of 350,000 to 400,000 acre-feet — it's "wet water," not just on paper.

In a joint letter to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, representatives from Nevada, Arizona, California, New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming asked the federal government to not issue permits for the project until all the Great Basin states and the Department of the Interior can reach consensus over operational concerns that range from a lack of water quality analysis from increased return flows to the Virgin River to an alleged failure to consider reasonable alternatives.

The Bureau of Reclamation could issue a final environmental impact report as soon as November.

The state representatives suggest that protracted litigation could ensue if the process goes ahead under its current framework, absent an interstate collaboration.

"That is not a recipe for creating the kind of meaningful and positive change needed to sustain the Colorado River in the coming decades," their letter reads.

One of those signatories, the Southern Nevada Water Authority, outlined the legal and operational issues further in a separate letter taking on what it sees as weaknesses in the draft environmental impact statement: Changes to

water quality could, for example, lead to an algal bloom on Lake Mead, especially as water levels drop and temperatures increase. And the justification Washington County gives for the water is insufficient, relies on a dated state analysis from 2011, rejects "extreme conservation efforts" that are commonplace elsewhere, and is narrow in scope, leaving federal partners out of the equation.

"The (draft environmental impact statement) does not describe the federal agencies' purposes and needs at all," wrote Colby Pellegrino, the deputy general manager for resources for the water authority, and Sara Price, senior assistant director of the Colorado River Commission of Nevada. "Instead, the project need is defined solely by Washington County's goal to develop the full 86,000 (acre-feet per year) of water supply."

John Weisheit, conservation director for the Moab, Utah-based group Living Rivers, said now is the time to think about using less water, not more. He said Washington County can be more efficient just with the water they have from the Virgin River. Regions like the Las Vegas metro have some groundwater but are, essentially, solely reliant on recharged Colorado water.

"Washington County kind of believes they're unique and special," he said. "They're not really true partners with the other six states, with the (Native American) tribes and with

Mexico. They're kind of on their own agenda."

Roerink said the Southern Nevada Water Authority helped write the playbook on conservation, as metros like Las Vegas along with Denver, Phoenix and Albuquerque, N.M., have cut their reliance on the Colorado, he said.

"They (Washington County) don't want the water because they need it, they want the water because they see it on paper and think they should have it," he said.

"If you tell yourself a lie over and over again, it can become a truth."

Clark County Commissioner Tick Segerblom, who also serves as program director for the Las Vegas Water Defender, said it's not realistic to go ahead with development on the scale of "a new Vegas" in southern Utah.

"There's just not enough water in the Colorado River, and the more you divert above Lake Powell the worse it's going to be for everyone downstream," he said.

Boulder City Mayor Kiernan McManus thinks the pipeline is under the radar — the Upper Basin, where Powell is, is managed separately of the Lower Basin, where Mead is.

Mead is his purposefully small city's water source and at the

core of its recreation and tourism economy.

"We see it every day," McManus said, referencing the stark white bathtub rings on the cliffs around the lake. "We see the lake level dropping to levels that it's never been at in my lifetime."

He said it's true that the Upper Basin only uses about half of what it's allotted. The Lower Basin uses everything. But there isn't much willingness to look at the changes of the past century and recalibrate, McManus said.

"The Law of the River that was developed back in the 1920s is no longer addressing the reality that we have now with large metropolitan areas like Phoenix and Las Vegas," McManus said.

Weisheit said the Colorado River Compact — the management framework that, with related agreements, regulations and court decisions, is known as the Law of the River — has not been revised since it was written a century ago. What Utah wants is legal, he acknowledged, but humans' laws and nature's laws "don't jive."

"The federal reserve can print money, but water brokers can't manufacture water. Nature has limits. The universe has laws. They can't be altered," he said.

"In other words, it works, until it doesn't."

Belnap said opposition and concern are not unexpected for such a high-profile infrastructure project, and he hopes to work productively with neighboring states.

“People have genuinely passionate viewings about these issues,” he said.

Roerink said the Lake Powell Pipeline Project represents a crossroads.

Segeberblom, a former state legislator and one-time river guide, says it portends the future. Other states and tribes in the Great Basin also have water rights not yet realized, to say nothing of Mexico.

“It’s not just St. George,” he said. “This is the first salvo in the coming water wars.”