

Pipeline project studies continue

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Members of the Lake Powell Pipeline Management Committee answer questions from the public during their meeting Thursday at the Washington County Water Conservancy District's offices in St. George. / Jud Burkett / The Spectrum & Daily News

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ST. GEORGE — The latest update on the licensing process for the Lake Powell Pipeline sparked some debate Thursday as water managers continue to wait on ongoing studies into the potential impacts of the project.

The years-long licensing process, which involves thousands of pages of research into everything from environmental impacts to how willing residents might be to accept stricter conservation measures,

stalled somewhat in the wake of the Great Recession, as southwestern Utah's once-booming population growth slowed to a crawl. But now, managers are seeing signs that the growth is revving back up, with building permits, real estate transactions and the overall economy picking up steam. The pipeline, billed by some water officials as the only feasible way to keep up as demand increases, is generating a renewed focus from state leaders.

"We see that growth happening faster now than it was three or four years ago," Eric Millis, director of the Utah Division of Water Resources, said during a meeting of the Lake Powell Pipeline Management Committee in St. George.

Washington County, home to an estimated 150,000 people today, is forecast to grow to nearly 200,000 by the end of the decade, and up to 580,000 in the next 50 years, according to projections generated by the governor's office.

State and county officials have for years pursued the pipeline as a solution, hoping to pump 80,000 acre feet of water 139 miles from Lake Powell at an estimated construction cost of nearly \$1 billion. It is not expected to be built and in use until after 2020.

Utah filed a preliminary application for the project to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in 2008. Although FERC would only directly license any hydropower facilities built along downhill segments of the pipeline, it is working with other agencies to develop a comprehensive environmental impact statement. But the documents needed to file an official license application are still not ready. Brian Liming, from consulting firm MWH Global, said Thursday that the plan at this point is to file in the spring of 2015, as work is still pending on studies into the impacts on cultural resources such as prehistoric archeological sites.