

Last chance to comment on Cove Reservoir

Eighty one people, plus 15 working on the project, attended the virtual public meeting on December 9 to learn more about the proposed Cove Reservoir near Orderville.

Mike Noel, Executive Director of Kane County Water Conservancy District (KCWCD), said "the project started 28 years ago with an agreement signed by Zion National Park."

After extensive negotiations, Washington County Water Conservancy District (WCWCD) agreed to abandon a major reservoir originally planned for Parunuweap Canyon in the Barracks area, just upstream from Zion National Park. The 1996 Zion National Park Water Rights Settlement Agreement allows the water districts to construct a smaller reservoir in Cove Canyon.

The section of the East Fork Virgin River through Zion National Park is designated as a Wild and Scenic River. The National Park Service is currently doing their own review of the draft EA, according to Brian Parker, lead project consultant with Transcon Environmental Inc.

The federal agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), released the draft Environmental

Assessment (EA) last month.

(<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ut/programs/planning/wpfp/?cid=nrcseprd1403022>).

The proposed Cove Reservoir will store water diverted from the East Fork Virgin River for irrigation of "1,100 acres of agricultural lands located in western Kane County and 4,958 acres in Washington County."

The reservoir will be 300 acres in surface area, with a maximum depth of 80 feet. Jackson Flat Reservoir is 220 acres.

An attendee asked, "what percentage of Glendale, Orderville and Mt. Carmel farmers would benefit from the reservoir?"

Parker responded he was not sure they had the number on that. Noel said, "Glendale will be able to take a larger percentage of the streamflow when the river is low, and Orderville and Mt Carmel will be able to take water from the reservoir during those times there is not enough water in the river."

Another attendee asked if there is a prohibition on municipal and industrial (M&I) uses. Noel answered, "there is nothing that would preclude the use of that water for M&I." He added, "the water rights shareholders could sell that water

for municipal and industrial uses any time they want to."

Norm Evenstad, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist, explained that municipal and industrial water use is an eligible purpose under the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, mainly for additional water storage.

Parker added that any, "M&I considerations are for current use and current demand," and "cannot be used for future growth in demand."

The draft EA does not specify who owns the water rights to be used for Cove Reservoir, and several attendees had questions about water rights.

Noel said that the water rights are owned by Glendale, Mt. Carmel and Orderville irrigation companies, and WCWCD. According to Noel, the WCWCD holds the majority of the water rights and those are senior rights. KCWCD owns no rights in this reservoir.

Corey Cram, Associate General Manager with WCWCD, added that the reservoir will store some of Washington County district's water rights to use downstream. He said WCWCD "will be participating by providing some of the funding for this project."

The NRCS estimates that the reservoir will cost \$30 million to build. The federal government will pay \$21.4 million, and

KCWCD and WCWCD will pay the remaining \$8.6 million. Cram did not specify WCWCD's share.

An attendee asked if the funding for the project has been approved? Evenstad explained that the project is in the planning phase. "Once the plan is approved through our chief in Washington, D.C., then we apply for the next phase, which is the final design, so we go after those funds." After the final design is approved, NRCS can request the construction funds. "There is no guarantee in any of those phases that we will have funds, it's based on what Congress is doing."

An attendee inquired about what percentage of the costs will be borne by the private alfalfa growing beneficiaries. Noel answered that the water going into the reservoir is owned by the irrigation company. They also paid for half of the \$1 million water pipeline. "This is a small irrigation company, there is not a lot of people involved in this irrigation company."

An attendee questioned whether or not alfalfa farming is the best use and in the public interest given prolonged droughts due to climate change. Noel answered that "alfalfa is the crop of the state of Utah." But Utah has a law saying "use it, or lose it." So, if an alfalfa farmer implements water efficient measures, they could actually lose the water they do not use. Noel said he would like to see the state change the law

to incentivize farmers to use their water in the most efficient way.

Two endangered fish, the woundfin and Virgin River chub, live in the Virgin River below Pah Tempe Hot Springs in La Verkin, about 50 river miles downstream from the Cove Reservoir site.

Several attendees asked how the alteration of flow will affect endangered species. Parker answered that the water will provide cooler water downstream that will benefit the endangered fish in the summer time.

Cram added that it also gives the WCWCD the abilities to put the additional water in their reservoirs as they work with biologists to affect positive changes for the endangered fish. "It is another tool in our toolbox to address endangered species recovery."

WCWCD currently pumps water upstream from Quail Creek Reservoir to lower the water temperature and salinity for the endangered fish. The Draft EA notes that, "The additional water would reduce the need to pump water from Quail Creek Reservoir located in Washington County to the springs to meet habitat requirements."

However, Transcon Environmental determined "this indirect effect would be minor."

Two attendees asked about the spread of invasive aquatic species, such as the quagga mussel, and algae blooms. Cram answered that the quagga mussel likes still water like ponds and reservoirs. It is not a riverine species and is not expected to be established in the Virgin River.

The draft EA says that, "the proposed reservoir would provide water-based recreation activities such as swimming, fishing and small and non-motorized boat use." Cram noted that allowing only non-motorized boats will be a huge step in the right direction towards limiting the quagga mussel spread.

The NRCS did not expect algae blooms to be an issue due to high elevation.

Another attendee said that, "Jackson Flat Reservoir is an embarrassing disaster built on an Indian burial ground," and asked how they can ensure that will not happen again? Noel said, "it was not a burial ground. All of the data from Brigham Young University and a private consultant firm said this was a village site and there was probably some type of die off because of the way the bodies were found. There were 54 human remains."

Tara Hoffmann, an archeologist with the NRCS, added that they completed a cultural resources inventory at the Cove Reservoir project sites. "Of all the cultural resources sites

we found, we are avoiding all of the sites which were found significant."

NRCS is planning to train the construction staff on recognizing cultural resources. If something is found, construction will be halted, the NRCS notified, and specific procedures will be followed.

Two property owners asked about access to their property since the current road will be under water. Dirk Clayson, private consultant on lands and real estate and KCWCD board member, said that all private properties will be provided with an alternate access road once the project is completed.

An attendee wanted to know about the gravel pits used to build the dam. Ronald Bolander, NEPA specialist with Transcon Environmental, said the new Black Knoll gravel pit on BLM land will be up to 50 acres in size, and the existing Bald Knoll pit will be expanded by 50-60 acres. Three other gravel pits are small and located on private land.

Parker was regretful that they did not get to answer all the questions during the public meeting. He encouraged the public to submit comments by e-mailing him at bparker@transcon.com, or by mail to Brian Parker, Transcon Environmental, 1745 South Alma School Road, Suite 220, Phoenix, Arizona 85210.

Public comments are due December 31, 2020.

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