

Beaver County hopes to block neighbor's groundwater pumping project

So much water has been pumped from under Utah's Cedar Valley over the years that the ground is sinking by as much as 1.2 inches a year, leaving cracks on the valley floor.

This is because the [Central Iron County Water Conservancy District](#) annually removes at least 7,000 more acre-feet from these aquifers than nature can replenish. So the [district's solution is to build a \\$250 million network](#) of wells and pipelines that would extract water from under Beaver County's Pine Valley, a place that gets less than eight inches of rain, and move it 66 miles to Cedar City.

Thus opens the next battle in a long-running dispute between the two southwest Utah counties over precious water resources that both say they desperately need. The [Bureau of Land Management last month initiated a comprehensive environmental analysis of the project](#), most of which would occupy public land.

Facing forecast water shortfalls, Iron County applied for the rights to the ancient groundwater under Pine and adjacent Wah Wah valleys in 2006. The state engineer's decision to award a combined 26,500 acre-feet a year has been the subject of prolonged litigation that was [resolved last year in Iron County's favor when a "stipulated judgment" was reached](#).

"We feel we didn't get fair representation in the hearing with the state," said Beaver County Commissioner Mark Whitney. "We were bullied, so finally we settled with what we could settle for."





(Rick Egan | Tribune file photo) Beaver County Commissioner Mark Whitney discuss the problems that come with wild horses grazing on public land northwest of Cedar City, April 23, 2014. In the ongoing dispute over groundwater claims in Beaver County by Iron County, Whitney worries that a pipeline project will hurt local farmers and the environment.

Not about to give up the fight, Beaver officials suspect there is not enough water under those valleys to sustain Iron County's appropriations. They argue the Pine Valley project could wind up sacrificing Beaver County's rural way of life for the sake of residential growth elsewhere. Springs could go dry, the water table could drop and fifth-generation ranchers could be looking for a new line of work.

"It could take up to 20 years before you know there is a problem with overpumping, but by then it's too late," Whitney said. Finding common cause with environmental groups and water user groups, Beaver officials contend the project would simply turn a problem of Iron County's own making into Beaver County's problem with dire consequences for the people and wildlife that depend on Pine Valley's springs.

But according to Paul Monroe, the water district's executive director, many safeguards are in place to ensure against the disaster feared by Beaver County. Among Utah's fastest growing counties, Iron needs to tap Pine and possibly Wah Wah and Hamlin valleys' groundwater to meet future water demands, diversify regional water supplies and enhance supply reliability.

Other options the district explored proved impractical from an economic or environmental standpoint. Iron County, for example, was [an initial participant in the proposed Lake Powell pipeline](#), but that project would have carried three times the estimated cost of the Pine Valley project, according to Monroe.

Whitney is frustrated that Iron County hasn't explored other options and even relinquished some of its existing resources that could have helped meet its needs.

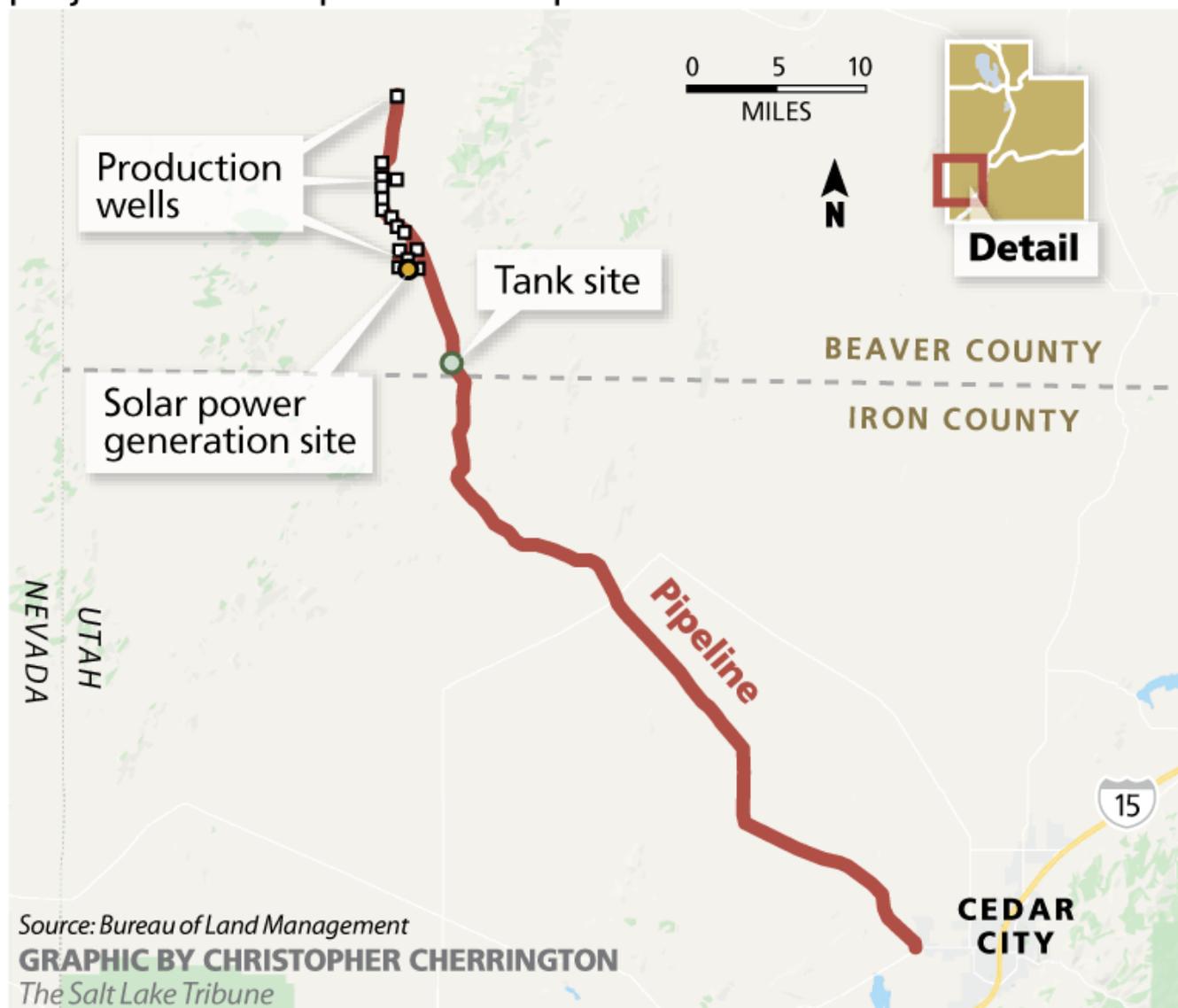
"They could have bought farms up and transferred water if growth was so important for them," Whitney said. "Look at [Kolob Reservoir](#). They owned all those rights and sold them to Washington County. That goes to show how silly and stupid they are. It wasn't like they didn't have options. So what do they do? They do the most unneighborly thing, they go and mine a sister county's water."

The Iron water district's service area is home to 50,000 people and its population is expected to double during the next 50 years. Without securing new sources, Iron County's growth will outstrip existing supplies, said Monroe.

The Iron water district proposes to drill 15 production wells and eight monitoring wells, all in Beaver County, that would feed up to 15,000 acre-feet of water a year into the pipeline. The piping would be 18 to 30 inches in diameter for the lateral lines tying the wells to the mainline, which would be up to 40 inches in diameter. The mainline would increase in diameter to 54 inches as it nears its southern terminus. The enlarged diameter is needed to accommodate water that could someday be connected to the pipeline in subsequent phases to capture groundwater extracted from Wah Wah and Hamlin valleys.

Pine Valley pipeline

An Iron County water district is seeking to build a network of wells and utility lines to extract up to 15,000 acre feet of groundwater from Beaver County's Pine Valley and pipe it south to help feed growing demand around Cedar City. The Bureau of Land Management is reviewing the \$200 million project, which is facing stiff opposition from neighboring counties concerned the project would deplete their aquifers.



Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune

A solar array installed on 200 acres of private land would power the pumping stations. The water would be pushed uphill to an underground concrete tank built at the alignment's high point on the county line, and from there the water would gravity feed south to Cedar City. The line, built of high-density polyurethane and steel, would be buried under a permanent 50-foot-wide right of way. Two-thirds of the line and wells would be on public land, while other components would occupy private and state trust land.

Critics likened the project to [Las Vegas' much larger bid to pump billions of gallons of groundwater from under Snake Valley on the Utah-Nevada state line](#) and neighboring basins to feed that desert metropolis's seemingly insatiable thirst. Just a few months ago, however, [Southern Nevada Water Authority formally abandoned that 30-year effort](#) after legal setbacks and a realization that it could meet its needs through conservation and more efficiently marshaling existing water sources, according to Kyle Roerink, executive director of [the Great Basin Water Network](#).

For years, that group fought the Vegas project and is now saddling up its legal cavalry to ride against the Pine Valley project. Roerink wishes Iron County would learn from Las Vegas' missteps and drop its claims to Pine Valley groundwater in favor of less costly alternatives.

"This is a project to feed sprawl in Cedar City," Roerink said. "This isn't a supplemental play here. It is a play to placate real estate developers and other monied interests."

A recent [study by the U.S. Geological Survey](#), concluded 19,500 acre-feet of groundwater a year move north out of Pine and Wah Wah valleys, or about 7,000 acre-feet less than what Iron County hopes to appropriate from these two basins. This suggests Iron's plans amount to unsustainable

groundwater "mining," critics say.

Monroe acknowledged the uncertainty around the availability of water, but the district is assuming those risks, will conduct robust monitoring to detect trouble and take steps to protect water users should trouble arise.

"We are using the best science available to understand the water sources in that valley," Monroe said. "We are putting as much mitigation in place to make sure we aren't impairing senior water rights holders. We understand that if we do, we need to make them whole."

But Beaver County officials are not convinced and hired [Simeon Herskovits](#), the New Mexico lawyer who had successfully represented the Great Basin Water Network in the Snake Valley fight, to help them oppose the Pine Valley project.

Herskovits and other critics contend the BLM's analysis must go beyond just the project's footprint on the ground, but also look at the effects of groundwater pumping on Pine Valley's wildlife, plant communities and farmers and the effects of the urban sprawl the water deliveries would enable.

"It includes potential air quality effects from increased erosion and dust emissions due to the lowering of the water table beneath springs, wetlands, wet meadows, lakes and reservoirs, and playas," Herskovits wrote in Beaver County's comments to the BLM. "Such increased dust emissions pose a serious threat to public health in communities across a broad swath of Utah and eastern Nevada, from Garrison to Baker to Callao to Hinckley and Delta to Tooele to Salt Lake City and its suburbs."

Monroe noted that it's the water district's statutory duty to plan decades into the future, not make judgment calls about how water should be put to

use. Assuming the project wins approval, he expects it will be at least another 10 years before the pipeline is up and running and its costs will be borne by those receiving the water.

“Traditionally in Utah, we have always brought water to the people. Diverting water is what we do here. It was [one of the first things the pioneers did in the Salt Lake Valley when they diverted water from City Creek](#),” Monroe said. “That doesn’t make it easy when water is diverted from your county, but ultimately water belongs to the state of Utah and the state awarded the rights to Iron County.”