

Las Vegas Review Journal

Nevada rancher, water authority opponent Dean Baker dead at 77

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Dean Baker was a rancher, a pilot and a businessman, but most people knew him as a thorn in the side of the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

The dogged opponent of the authority's [plans to siphon water from across eastern Nevada](#) died Saturday at a St. George, Utah, hospital from complications from Alzheimer's disease. He was 77.

"He was driving around the ranch on dirt roads a week before he died," said Baker's oldest son, Dave. "It meant everything to him."

Baker was born Dec. 19, 1939, in Delta, Utah, where he learned to farm, ranch and fly an airplane solo by the age of 16.

In 1959, he moved to Snake Valley, on the Nevada-Utah border 300 miles northeast of Las Vegas, to help run a ranch his father had acquired there a few years earlier.

The town they settled in was also called Baker, but that was just a coincidence.

Dave Baker said his dad never finished high school but still earned a business degree from the University of Utah.

"He was a good businessman, and he recognized opportunity," Dave Baker said.

Under Dean Baker's direction, his son said, their cattle and alfalfa operation more than doubled in size over the past 20 years, consolidating what used to be a dozen separate ranches into a single, family-owned corporation operating on more than 12,000 acres on both sides of the state line.

Fighting MX missiles

Baker's first taste of activism came during the Carter administration, when the federal government floated plans for a system of mobile nuclear missiles mounted on railroad tracks to be laid across 35,000 square miles of Nevada and Utah.

Dave Baker said the MX missile project would have “swallowed up a bunch of our winter range,” so his dad joined the brief, successful campaign against it.

A decade later, Baker found himself in another David-and-Goliath fight when Las Vegas water officials launched a sweeping grab for unappropriated groundwater across rural Nevada, including Snake Valley.

Baker spent the better part of the next 20 years commenting at meetings, writing letters, serving on committees and joining lawsuits in hopes of blocking the water authority’s still-pending, multibillion-dollar pipeline proposal. The effort required countless trips — often in his own airplane — to Las Vegas and Carson City, where he registered as a legislative lobbyist so he could plead his case directly to lawmakers.

In the process, he became the unofficial spokesman for the opposition. Reporters from across the country and around the globe painted him as a folk hero — the humble rancher fighting to protect his spread from the insatiable thirst of Las Vegas. And Baker was happy to oblige — anything to spread the word about their struggle.

“It’s just because I’m a bullheaded, opinionated old goat,” [he told the Las Vegas Review-Journal in 2013](#).

Longtime Nevada activist Abigail Johnson fought alongside Baker against both the MX missiles and the water authority’s pipeline. She later got to know him as a neighbor after she bought a place in Baker.

‘A very courageous man’

“He was a very courageous man and a very principled man,” she said.

One of his strengths, Johnson said, was his ability to work with and even befriend people from very different backgrounds, including a few rabid environmentalists who liked to argue with him about livestock grazing on public land. “He started out as a conservative rancher, and he was always a conservative rancher, but he had an open mind and he wasn’t afraid to change,” she said.

Once after a water meeting in Las Vegas, Johnson caught a ride back to Snake Valley in Baker’s plane, which he landed on one of the long dirt roads at the ranch. “He showed me all kinds of things on the way,” she recalled. “He just loved flying. That was just his favorite thing.”

Baker is survived by his wife of 19 years, Barbara; his daughter, Chris Robinson; sons Dave, Craig and Tom; stepsons Gary and Dennis Perea; and 18 grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his parents, Fredrick and Betty Baker, and his brother, Carl.

Baker was buried Monday in the same cemetery as his parents, about two miles from the ranch in Snake Valley.

His family is planning a public memorial service at the ranch on June 24.

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