
Water and public lands: Groundwater mining in Nevada

Readers may recall our battle a few years ago against a spate of quid pro quo wilderness bills—trading wilderness protection in one area for sell-offs, exchanges, and outright giveaways of public land elsewhere. One of these was Senator Harry Reid’s “Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation, and Development Act of 2004.” Among the bill’s worst provisions was the conveyance of a free, half-mile wide, 300+ mile-long right-of-way across public land for construction of a pipeline that would take water from counties in eastern Nevada and send it to Las Vegas.

Susan Lynn, a member of Western Lands Project and former coordinator of the Great Basin Water Network, explains the impacts and implications of the project.

OVER THE COURSE OF A decade-long drought, the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) has widely circulated alarming photos of Lake Mead’s “bathtub ring,” showing the striking decline of the reservoir that holds Las Vegas’ water supply from the Colorado River. SNWA has aggressively pursued ways to supplement its Colorado River water allocation, and the water authority’s manager, Pat Mulroy, is determined that Las Vegas must continue to grow, and that to do so it will need more water. Mulroy is well-known for her cold dismissal of anyone who objects to her plans.

As early as the late 1980s, SNWA was tying up unclaimed groundwater rights in Clark, Lincoln, and White Pine counties, north and east of Las Vegas. Because they were only recently acted upon by the Nevada State Engineer, these applications have prevented economic growth in rural areas for nearly a quarter of a century. Now, the fate of northern Nevada’s towns, ranches, and farms will be determined

by the extent to which SNWA is able to exploit the water rights and transport the water.

This last August, the Bureau of Land Management issued its Final Environmental Impact Statement on the pipeline and SNWA’s plan to remove 200,000 to 300,000 acre-feet of water every year from eastern Nevada and western Utah with the aid of the pipeline.

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The project is estimated to cost \$15.6 billion. Above and beyond the monetary costs, the anticipated impacts of withdrawing water from already dry public land deserts and valleys are truly alarming.

- The water table will drop from 10-200 feet within 200 years in the four valleys approved by the Nevada State Engineer.
- The land surface will subside 5 feet across 525 square miles.
- Nearly 35,000 tons of wind-blown dust will be spread every year.
- Another 180 to 340 miles of lateral pipelines will crisscross the landscape.
- 144 to 174 wells will be installed, with accompanying roads and power lines.

Many of these valleys are within the Colorado River flow basin, but SNWA will be intercepting groundwater flows to the Colorado River before they reach Lake

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Western foothills of Snake Valley looking to the S. Snake Range and Great Basin National Park (Photo: D. Ghiglieri)

Mead while simultaneously tapping its Colorado River rights.

According to the Final EIS, the project would imperil 305 springs, 112 miles of streams, 8,000 acres of wetlands and 191,506 acres of shrub land wildlife habitat for sage grouse, mule deer, elk and pronghorn antelope. In addition, Great Basin National Park and its carbonate caverns (Lehman Caves), and at least three federal and state wildlife refuges will see impacts from the water withdrawals.

Tribes with reserved water rights and sacred sites, along with existing senior water rights holders, are very concerned about severe declines in groundwater, and it is anticipated that withdrawals will jeopardize ranching, irrigation, and community water systems. To many, this would constitute “groundwater mining,” supposedly prohibited by most western states wishing to maximize “beneficial use.”

It is widely feared that the pipeline project will create “the next Owens Valley,” a reference to the California Valley that was dewatered via pipelines built by Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in the early 20th century (and dramatized in the movie “Chinatown”).

Great Basin Water Network has challenged the State Engineer on SNWA’s water rights applications in the 7th District Court, State of Nevada. Briefings are due January 30, 2013 with oral arguments scheduled for June 2013. In the meantime, the Network, along with its many allies, is awaiting BLM’s Record of Decision on the pipeline, expected to be issued soon. You can follow this story by going to <http://greatbasinwater.net>.

-SUSAN LYNN

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