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The new guy

Conservationists split on whether Obama's Interior nominee can slow down the rural water grab

by MEREDITH MCGHAN

AS the Southern Nevada Water Authority moves forward with plans to draw rural groundwater from multiple valleys in Nevada and Utah to support growth in Las Vegas, conservationists grow hopeful that the Obama administration's policies might provide the change needed to keep rural Nevada from becoming a dustbowl.

In its last phase of planning its multibillion-dollar pipeline, the authority has asked for a September 2009 hearing from state engineer Tracy Taylor to pump 16 billion gallons a year from White Pine County's Snake Valley to Las Vegas.



Scientists say that to drain rural Nevada can't help but endanger wildlife and create dustbowl conditions. Despite their warnings, the authority convinced federal agencies that the pipeline wouldn't harm native species, and several agencies dropped their protests to the project prior to earlier state hearings about pumping water from other rural areas.

But that was before the election, and before the appointment last week of U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., as Obama's secretary of the Interior. Salazar, whom many describe as a moderate consensus-builder, will oversee the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Reclamation and others. A native Westerner with roots in rural ranching communities, Salazar may take a more conservation-friendly approach to Nevada's water problems, say some environmentalists.

"Sen. Salazar has made his name on stopping water grabs," said Carrie Doyle, executive director of the Colorado Conservation Voters, a group that educates Colorado citizens about candidates' conservation records. "His family has been ranchers for generations, and in 2003 he worked with conservationists and ranchers to oppose a water grab in Colorado. He fought McCain's campaign here to renegotiate the [Colorado River] water compact. I'm glad to have an interior secretary with these issues in his DNA."

The Colorado Conservation Trust's deputy director, Lloyd Athearn, says Salazar's appointment is a win for environmentalists.

"We in the conservation field are ecstatic," he said. "Senator Salazar is a Westerner who gets the interplay between conservation issues."

Athearn said he thinks Salazar will know how to use the West's water in a balanced way because he understands the issues Western communities face with rapid growth and an increasing need for water.

"Colorado has been dealing with quickly growing communities like Nevada has," Athearn said. "In the '90s, we were the third fastest-growing state. I think Salazar knows how to protect natural resources and quality of life. He can look at issues from multiple perspectives and make the best decision."

Dry on ideas

Salazar has gone on record saying that in rural areas, people understand water as their lifeblood. But not all conservationists believe he will work to stop the pipeline or are pleased with his appointment.

"The Department of the Interior desperately needs a strong, forward looking, reform-minded Secretary," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. "Unfortunately, Ken Salazar is not that man."

The Center for Biological Diversity's also points out that Salazar has a weak record on the Endangered Species Act. Efforts to fight the Nevada pipeline have included invoking endangered species legislation that protects dozens of plants and animals found only in the Great Basin.

John Orr works for the Denver Public Works Wastewater Management division and blogs on environmental issues affecting the West. Orr has endorsed Salazar, but sees him as a centrist who may not side with environmentalists.

"Salazar is a conservationist in the mold of Teddy Roosevelt," Orr said. "You can be a conservationist and not satisfy everyone. He's a pragmatist rather than a progressive. I can't imagine that he wouldn't embrace developing water to satisfy growth."

Meanwhile, at the Southern Nevada Water Authority, officials seem happy to have a nominee conversant with Western water issues. As for his possible impact on the pipeline project, "I wouldn't anticipate anything is going to change with Salazar's appointment because there's an established process by which environmental impact statements happen," says authority spokesman J.C. Davis. "In my experience, it doesn't happen at a federal level. If anything changes, it will be because the valley's population is no longer expanding and we can defer the project."

Interior dialogue

Launce Rake, spokesman for the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, said Salazar's understanding of the needs of urban and rural Westerners bodes well for Nevada's vexed water situation.

"[He's] served the people of Colorado admirably as the state's attorney general and for four years as senator," Rake said. "He's led an approach to environmental policy that balances sustainable use of natural resources with support of the basic principles of conservation."

Rake said federal agencies had begun to take a cautious approach to the Snake Valley question even before Obama announced Salazar's appointment.

"The Department of the Interior got marching orders to facilitate the water grab, but we're hopeful things will change," Rake said. "It may take time and effort to change the culture in the Interior Department to [embrace] their legal and administrative responsibilities. But I see some evidence already. National Park Service employees, who are part of the Department of the Interior, have indicated they have strong concerns about the water authority's plans to dewater the area in and around the Great Basin National Park in White Pine County. It's a good start."

Abigail Johnson, who is on the board of directors of the Great Basin Water Network, says she's encouraged by Salazar's background in environmental law and water issues.

"I'm hopeful that as a new person in D.C. who understands the BLM's strengths and weaknesses Salazar can bring the knowledge he has as a rancher to apply to the BLM in a practical way," she said. "The crux of it is how the science-versus-politics aspect of the water grab gets dealt with on a federal level."

In late November, a coalition of several environmental groups including the Great Basin Water Network, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Southern Nevada Sierra Club, and PLAN sent a letter to Kempthorne out of concern for the pattern of agencies dropping their protests before water hearings. The letter asked for open and full participation for the Snake Valley Water hearings in an attempt to stave off opponents' being shut out.

Utah resident Steve Erickson, a member of the Great Basin Water Network's board, said the organization plans to stress upon Salazar that decisions about the pipeline should be based on science rather than politics. Erickson pointed out Salazar's caution regarding the development of oil shale as heartening in terms of water conservation.

"Producing oil shale fuel requires vast amounts of water," he said. "When it comes to projects that could ruin the rurals, I hope Sen. Salazar remembers his roots."