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UAC, conservationists ramp up fight against pipeline

Snake Valley » Groups fear scientific warnings will be silenced.

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Federal scientists have compiled information about the Snake Valley ecosystem that a coalition of conservationists and the Utah Association of Counties want on the record when final decisions are made about a proposed water pipeline to Las Vegas.

The Great Basin Water Network and UAC have sent separate letters to Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne urging him not to allow federal agencies to opt out of a hearing next year that would advance plans by the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) to build a \$3.5 billion, 285-mile pipeline to drain the aquifer around Snake Valley for Vegas growth. The conservationists and UAC oppose the groundwater drawdown and fear Interior will allow SNWA and four Interior agencies to cut a deal before the end of the Bush administration that would keep scientific findings under wraps and perhaps harm the Snake Valley environment.

At issue is the health of Great Basin National Park, Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge, tribal groups and public lands around the park, said Susan Lynn, Great Basin Water Network coordinator.

UAC is largely concerned about air quality and worries that SNWA won't heed Utah officials who say the water project would turn Snake Valley into a dust bowl, said Mark Ward, attorney for UAC.

A resolution passed last month unanimously by all 29 Utah counties recommends that Interior put U.S. Bureau of Land Management field offices in Utah in charge of studying the part of Snake Valley -- most of it, in fact -- that lies in Utah. In an October lawsuit filed in Nevada state court, the counties alleged siphoning water from an aquifer that lies under the two states to feed Vegas would wilt Snake Valley vegetation.

If that happens, winds could pick up the destabilized soils and send them in dust-storm clouds to a Wasatch Front already struggling with particulate pollution, Ward said.

The conservationists and UAC fear that because Interior already approved a deal to drop pipeline protests from the BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service regarding four other water basin valleys south of Snake Valley, the trend likely would continue.

SNWA spokesman J.C. Davis said his agency would indeed like the same kind of deal in Snake Valley because it would allay the federal scientists' objections before the hearing, making further legal action unnecessary.

But SNWA hasn't yet had any Snake Valley-related meetings with the feds, Davis said, nor is it concerned with beating the clock on the Bush administration.

"Believe it or not," he said, "we want the right thing for the environment, and we understand these agencies have stewardship."

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The Nevada groundwater pipeline

» In April 2007, Nevada State Engineer Tracy Taylor authorized the Southern Nevada Water Authority to take up to 40,000 acre-feet of water annually from the aquifer that lies underneath Spring Valley, west of Great Basin National Park. An acre-foot is considered enough water for a family of four for a year.

» SNWA also wants to take groundwater out of Snake Valley, on the Utah-Nevada line.

» The water would run through a 285-mile pipeline to southern Nevada. SNWA had requested 91,000 acre-feet annually. Taylor estimated that 80,000 acre-feet a year could be funneled without affecting the water table.

» Utah and Nevada must negotiate a water-sharing agreement before SNWA can build the pipeline.

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