

Ask an enviro

We consulted the experts for quick answers to big, serious, scary, fundamental questions about the future of Earth

THE BAD ECONOMY HAS SLOWED GROWTH CONSIDERABLY IN THE LAS VEGAS VALLEY. WHAT'S THE UPSIDE?

It affords us some much-needed time to ask the community and leaders to re-think how Nevada should and can grow responsibly toward the future. Water, infrastructure, conservation, open space, green building, alternative energy, new job creation, environmental protection and optimal land use must all be factors in the growth decisions in the next 20 years.

The case study has been confirmed: Growth did not pay for growth. A key question for the future is how we ensure that as we move into a new growth cycle, growth does pay for growth, and we grow, not for growth's sake, but for the purpose of creating a sustainable and balanced environment.

--Lisa Mayo-DeRiso, Northwest Residents For Responsible Growth

What's so bad about the Southern Nevada Water Authority's proposed rural water pipeline plan?

The euphemistically titled "Groundwater Development Project" -- more commonly referred to as the Las Vegas Water Grab -- is a horrendous idea, but we can't put all the blame for this larded-up, environmentally destructive monstrosity on Pat Mulroy, czarina of the Southern Nevada Water Authority. The West has a long history of the powers-that-be looking around for the weakest links -- Native Americans, sheep herders, the natural environment, Spanish-speaking settlers, etc. -- then kicking the crap out of 'em and taking their land or water in the name of profit.

That's exactly what is happening here. Recently 150 scientists signed a letter saying there will be terrible environmental impacts from the Water Grab. The water authority knows it -- that's why the agency has consistently tried to bar environmental issues from the various hearings and court actions around this issue. That's why the authority has tried to threaten, buy off or buy out environmental groups, ranchers, law firms and even the federal government.

What we could and should be doing is protecting our access to the Southwest's shared natural bounty along the Colorado River. The Rocky Mountains, source of the river and Lake Mead, aren't in drought now, but Lake Mead -- the source of nearly all our water -- is not recovering. That's because the water crisis is not a natural crisis. It is based on too much human demand. And what humans do, we can undo. Instead of spending billions to create a bigger problem years down the road, let's build a Las Vegas and Southwest that is sustainable now.

--Launce Rake, Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada

What grade would you give Secretary of Interior Salazar so far?

I'd give him a C- , a definite step above the "FFF" of the Bush administration, but far too timid than is needed to address the pressing environmental issues of today. For instance, Salazar has not yet taken any positive steps to permanently reverse the grave damage done to the Endangered Species Act late in the Bush administration. Another disappointment is Salazar's support for new coal and oil shale development on federal lands, despite the fact that their combustion is the leading source of greenhouse gas emissions and the resultant climate change. A few more: the decision to remove Endangered Species Act protections for the gray wolf populations found in the Rockies and the Lake States regions; and the ignoring of sound science resulting in the failure to place the ashy storm petrel and the San Francisco Bay-Delta population of the longfin smelt under the protections of the Endangered Species Act.

--Rob Mrowka, Center for Biological Diversity

What is the most important conservation opportunity available to the Las Vegas Valley?

Preserving the upper Las Vegas Wash. The area is known internationally for its ice-age fossil resources. The remains of extinct mammoths, giant sloths, camels, giant jaguars and American horses are embedded in the soils and rock formations of the area. The area also now provides a home for many present-day but imperiled species such as the desert tortoise, Las Vegas bearpoppy, Las Vegas buckwheat and the Merriam's bearpoppy.

It also provides open space and a potential place for passive recreation such as walking, hiking and horseback riding, as well as educational and research pursuits. Unfortunately, the majority of this ecosystem of former marshes and spring mounds has been already destroyed by urban development. Much of the city of North Las Vegas and the upper beltway destroyed and covers what we now see only as a remnant.

The cities and county want to see much of the upper Las Vegas Wash developed and paved over. Conservationists see the wonderful opportunity to preserve this area. The outcome will be determined by a Bureau of Land Management planning process; a draft of the plan is due out later this year.

--Rob Mrowka, Center for Biological Diversity

Which is the largest surprise polluter in the state?

I'll leave the specifics to the EPA, but I will say this: We all have a responsibility for the pollution in our state. Consider a coal-fired power plant and the toxins from the smokestack that pollute our air and water, or its greenhouse gas emissions that heats up our planet and threatens our very existence. The energy that comes from that plant goes to our casinos, our water districts, our homes and businesses. We all rely on this energy to power our lives and drive our economy. We all share in the responsibility to be good stewards of our planet, and that means be more responsible with the use of our resources. That being said, we should make sure that we hold our elected leaders accountable for the decisions they make concerning the use and protection of our natural resources.

--Scot Rutledge, executive director, Nevada Conservation League & Education Fund

How will climate change affect Nevada in the 21st century?

* By 2100, average temperatures in Nevada could rise by three or four degree in spring and fall and by five or six degrees in summer and winter. Obviously, this warming would speed up the evaporation of Lake Mead, already at just 49 percent capacity, and predicted by the Scripps Institution for Oceanography to have a 50 percent chance of completely drying up by 2050.

* Analysts agree that "a long-term regional water shortage could prove devastating to several economic sectors, challenging the state's population and economic growth."

* With development slowed, we could expect nearly \$19 billion in lost revenue for state and local governments as tens of thousands more jobs disappear.

--State Economic and Environmental Costs of Climate Change, National Conference of State Legislatures and the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Environmental Research.

What is the Public Land Management Act and why is it important?

Passed in March, the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act designates more than 2 million acres of wilderness and protects numerous new national heritage sites and rivers. This means that many of our pristine open spaces and national treasures, such as the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Great Basin National Parks, are protected. The measures in the omnibus lands act benefit rural economies by providing new opportunities for tourism and recreation as well as desirable places for people to live and work.

--Jake Horowitz, Mountain West field associate for Environment America