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## Water pipeline project advances with new law

*President signs Lincoln County public land registration*

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WASHINGTON -- Government officials can start identifying federal property for auction and preparing studies that could lead to construction of a water pipeline to Las Vegas after President Bush signed a Lincoln County public land bill into law late Tuesday.

Bush enacted the legislation 13 days after it was passed by Congress. The law opens the door for the Southern Nevada Water Authority to pipe water along a 299-mile corridor from rural counties to Las Vegas.

The law redesignates thousands of acres of public property in Lincoln County for sale or for wilderness protections.

"We've created a boost for Lincoln County's economy while protecting environmentally sensitive areas and allowing for the development of new water resources," Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., said in a statement.

Before Southern Nevada officials can start laying pipe, the Nevada state engineer must approve groundwater permits in Lincoln and White Pine counties, and the Bureau of Land Management must complete an environmental study of the project.

Southern Nevada water officials are pursuing a pipeline from rural county aquifers to supplement the region's drinking supplies from the Colorado River.

By having Congress designate a corridor route, water officials said they

will be able to skip several years of study. Las Vegas officials have said they could start piping water from Lincoln County by 2014.

Conservation groups and central Nevada residents plan to watch Southern Nevada efforts to tap rural water.

"People in rural Nevada are concerned this could be a draining of water from them," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Besides its implications for water delivery, the new law was designed to encourage land development in Lincoln County. The law opens roughly 90,000 acres of federal land for auction around Hiko, Ash Springs, Rachel, Alamo, Carp, Crestline, Panaca and Pioche.

An additional 777,000 acres of federal land will be protected as wilderness, preventing development, oil and gas drilling or off-road vehicle use.

"The final product not only protects sensitive lands but also increases, albeit by only a modest amount, the level of private property in a county where the federal government controls 98 percent of the land," Rep. Jim Gibbons, R-Nev., said in a statement.