

Environmentalists, lawmakers find compromise on pipeline bill

By **Colton Lochhead** / Las Vegas Review-Journal

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CARSON CITY — Environmental groups have dropped their opposition to a bill they had originally blasted as a way for the state to green-light a controversial plan to pipe water from eastern Nevada to Las Vegas after the bill was amended last week.

In its original form, Assembly Bill 30 would have laid out an easier path for the Southern Nevada Water Authority's long-standing proposal to build a 300-mile pipeline to pump groundwater from eastern Nevada to Las Vegas that would come with an estimated price tag of \$15 billion, according to groups such as the Center for Biological Diversity, Great Basin Water Network and Nevada Conservation League.

But AB30 was altered significantly enough on Wednesday to allow those groups to feel comfortable enough to now say they are neutral on the bill.

"This bill does not authorize the Las Vegas pipeline," Patrick Donnelly, director of the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a legislative committee hearing

for the bill last week. “This is a win for the environment because sometimes you win by not losing.”

With those groups, and some rural governmental bodies such as Eureka County and the Central Nevada Water Authority, no longer opposed to the proposal, AB30 was voted out of committee by lawmakers in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee, thus surviving a key deadline that passed Friday.

For Donnelly and the other groups, a slight wording change was the biggest reason for their change of position.

The bill originally called for the state engineer to eliminate conflicts between junior and senior water rights holders in the state. That would have meant that longtime rights holders might have lost access to some of their granted water if someone were to challenge it.

But the amended version instead calls on the state engineer to avoid those conflicts in areas where there is still water left to appropriate, effectively keeping intact the process that has historically governed Nevada’s water rights laws for more than a century.

“We cut out a few words, added some safety nets and built a foundation for what is likely to be a long, difficult process to address our state’s water future,” Kyle Roerink, executive director of the Great Basin Water Network, said in the hearing last week.

Following the contentious first hearing back in late February, the bill appeared headed for the trash bin.

“It was not looking very favorable for finding a path forward,” Nevada Department of Conservation & Natural Resources Director Brad Crowell said last week.

But after weeks of meetings between all sides, including the environmental groups, rural counties and state officials, the compromise was born.

And from the state’s perspective, the bill still accomplishes what it set out to do by adding clarity to the existing laws, which will help regulators better handle future appropriations, said acting State Engineer Tim Wilson.

Assemblywoman Heidi Swank, D-Las Vegas, took a moment before the committee voted Wednesday to acknowledge the work done to find middle ground, saying it’s something that should be remembered.

“This is how it’s supposed to work,” Swank said.

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