Clark County Commission
Clark County Government Center
500 S. Grand Central Pkwy.
Las Vegas, NV 89155-1111

Regarding: Proposed SNWA Ground Water Pipeline

Dear Commissioner:  Mary Beth Scow  Chris Giunchigliani
Susan Brager  Steve Sisolak
Larry Brown  Lawrence Weekly
Tom Collins

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national non-profit environmental advocacy group concerned with protecting rare species and solutions and adaptations to climate change with over 320,000 members and on-line advocates. The Great Basin Water Network is a coalition of Native Americans, sportsmen, environmentalists, ranchers, and rural and urban persons opposed to the proposed Southern Nevada ground water mining and pipeline project. The Nevada Conservation League is a statewide environmental organization representing over 30,000 conservation advocates working to protect Nevada’s natural resources and support sustainable policies at the local, state, and federal level.

We respectfully request you oppose the project and instruct your representatives on the SNWA Board to voice this opposition before that body.

While we understand the need to fortify Southern Nevada’s water supply, we feel that considering the extreme fiscal, social and environmental impacts that the time has come to end the pipeline project, cut the expense of throwing good money into a horrendous project and look for other alternative in addressing Southern Nevada’s needs.

As you are aware, the recently uncovered Ability to Finance report by Hobbs, Ong and Associates forecasts that the total price of building and financing the pipeline will be approximately $15.5 BILLION, far in excess of $3.2 billion the SNWA has been telling elected officials and the public. While this cost is speculative given the uncertainties and assumptions involved, it is more likely to be a low-ball estimate given SNWA’s sponsorship as well as uncertainty about the ultimate bond rating the project will receive. Given that the SNWA has no current water rights in Spring, Cave, Dry, Delamar and Snake Valleys, and given the huge environmental costs of the project and massive outpouring of opposition to it, bond ratings
could easily be lower than in the Hobbs-Ong report, adding significantly to the total cost of the project.

The argument of jobs stimulation from the project is a limited one. In the economic section of the Bureau of Land Management ("BLM") draft environmental impact statement, it is disclosed that in the peak year of construction only 1314 jobs would be created and that figure then steadily declines to 377 jobs in the project’s twelfth year.

We feel that other alternatives exist that were not analyzed in the draft environmental impact statement that you as citizen representatives who oversee the SNWA can insist they give serious study.

In the current SNWA Water Resources Plan a goal has been set to save 276,000 acre feet of water per year through aggressive water conservation and investing in modern indoor and outdoor water efficient appliances and devices by the year 2035. This in turn would reduce our per capita water usage to about 200 gallons per capita per day – an amount still high compared to many other communities. In a report just filed with the Nevada State Engineer, the Pacific Institute – a nonpartisan research institute that works to advance environmental protection, economic development, and social equity, suggests that a per capita goal in line with current practice in most western, arid-climate cities would be 166 gallons per capita per day. If monies are to be expended to secure water for Southern Nevada, let it be to move up this noble goal of increased conservation and efficiency. While the savings from the current cash for grass program stated in terms of millions of gallons of water saved sound significant, it in fact is not, only resulting in the savings of tens of acre feet of water. Much more is needed and can be done.

SNWA General Manager Mulroy has recently suggested that a public works project be implemented to divert flood and surplus water out of the Mississippi River and to send it to the Plains States and Colorado in exchange for a greater portion of Colorado River water to Nevada. While the environmental impacts remain to be analyzed, it seems to us that this multiple-benefits project is definitely worth pursuing.

Another alternative is the construction of desalinization plants in Mexico and California and exchanging desalinated ocean water for Colorado River water and/or pumping desalinated water up the Colorado River Corridor to Southern Nevada. The costs associated with desalinization continue to decline. While energy intensive, desalinization plants in the Arabian peninsula and Australia currently utilize renewable sources of energy and similar solar, wind and ocean current sources of power could be utilized in this case as well.

The Congressional Delegation should be enlisted to petition the federal government to open discussions on a reallocation of Colorado River water among the states and among the types of uses in the states. Clearly, an agreement formed 90-years ago which over-allocated the River to begin with, begs for a serious, science and social-based analysis and revision.
Finally, we urge your body and the elected officials in the Cities of Southern Nevada to begin an honest and frank discussion with the residents and businesses on crafting a vision for a long-term sustainable and livable community. Clearly the old paradigm of a growth driven economy, and the belief that growth pays for growth, have failed and do not hold the promise for a bright future in Southern Nevada.

As a beginning, recognition must be given to the unavoidable fact that Las Vegas Valley is in the driest desert in North America, and that all predictions by the science community of the United States point to a hotter and drier time ahead. Recognition must be acknowledged that the population of Southern Nevada cannot continue to grow unbounded. The natural growth boundary of the surrounding federal lands must be respected and used to the region’s advantage. Growth should only occur within the present disposal boundary and all attempts to expand it must be denied. We believe a very thriving, sustainable and livable community in Southern Nevada is very possible with the proper attention given to the areas ecological setting, and the conservation and wise use of scarce resources, notably water.

We should be clear, we are not opposed to continued growth in southern Nevada, but in fact support the prioritization of development in our urban cores. The days of building thousands of homes on the edge of the valley are over. New single-family home water hook-ups will be scarce, a point both recognized by SNWA and various developers throughout the valley. Denser, more transit-oriented development will benefit your constituents and our environment.

Again, we humbly and respectfully ask that you give serious consideration to our request and end the SNWA ground water mining and pipeline project and in its place embark on an exploration of the alternatives and a pathway for a thriving, sustainable and livable Southern Nevada.

/s/ Susan Lynn
Susan Lynn
Director, Great Basin Water Network

Rob Mrowka
Conservation Advocate
Center for Biological Diversity

Scot Rutledge
Executive Director, Nevada Conservation League

CC: Congressional Delegation
City Councils of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson, Boulder City and Mesquite