

Elko, rest of Nevada need funds for water projects

By KEN RITTER Associated Press

September 28, 2015

[Published in the Elko Daily Free Press](#)

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A milestone pipeline project to keep drawing water from a shrinking Lake Mead is just one of many efforts on a long list of projects aimed at keeping plentiful and cheap tap water flowing in the nation's most arid state.

Officials call the \$817 million "Third Straw" to Las Vegas the most expensive single water works project ever in Nevada.

An Associated Press examination of federal Environmental Protection Agency data found Nevada listing some \$5.6 billion in water projects that need funding over the next 20 years — about in the middle of the pack nationally and locally.

"It's markedly different than the East and Midwest," said Mark Foree, general manager of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority in Reno. "We're not like Philadelphia, with a 200-year-old system. The vast majority of our pipelines are probably only 40 or 50 years old."

The federal agency projects it will cost \$384 billion over 20 years just to maintain the nation's existing drinking water infrastructure. Replacing pipes, treatment plants and other water works as well as expanding systems to handle population growth could cost \$1 trillion.

Neighboring Utah needs to fund \$3.7 billion in drinking water projects by the mid-2030s, according to the EPA data. Arizona needs \$7.4 billion. California needs \$44.5 billion.

Needs in Nevada include:

- \$2.8 billion for pipeline and water distribution projects.
- \$1.3 billion for water treatment projects.
- \$1 billion for water intake structures, drilled wells and spring collectors.

— \$331 million for water storage projects.

State Department of Environmental Protection chief Dave Emme said Nevada helps water agencies chip away at their 20-year needs list with low-interest loans for water infrastructure improvements.

The revolving fund takes in \$12 million to \$13 million a year in EPA grants, Emme said, and is augmented with interest revenues. It has about \$43 million today.

Atop the 2016 funding list is a \$12 million loan to the Kingsbury General Improvement District to relocate an obsolete water treatment plant in the Stateline community along Lake Tahoe's south shore.

Also listed: Arsenic mitigation and groundwater treatment projects in Carson City, the Douglas County fairgrounds, and towns and homeowner associations; a storage tank replacement in Elko; a metering system in Tonopah; distribution lines in Ely; \$8,000 to repair a water tank in Baker.

"We still struggle with some of the small towns and communities or privately owned mobile home parks with their own systems and limited ways to maintain and upgrade them," Emme said.

The bottom line in 2016 totals more than \$279 million. Not all will be funded, Emme said.

Statewide, Nevada gets a little less than 8 inches of rainfall per year, according to the National Weather Service. Las Vegas gets half that amount.

In the north, and away from cities, drinking water comes from streams and wells tapping underground aquifers.

But the Truckee River is Reno's lifeline. Foree said the Truckee Meadows authority has 120,000 customers in Washoe County, and spends about \$20 million a year maintaining and upgrading 1,300 miles of pipeline, pumping stations, regulators, tanks and the 90 wells that augment the river water supply.

In the south, Las Vegas gets 90 percent of its drinking water from Colorado River snowmelt runoff at Lake Mead, the huge reservoir behind Hoover Dam.

Water hadn't even flooded the third intake before the Las Vegas-based Southern Nevada Water Authority began construction on another big project — a \$650

million third pumping station to keep water flowing to the casino Strip and sprawling suburbs. Customers served by the authority and its seven member agencies are footing most of that bill.

But Emme said about 80 percent of the money flowing through the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund goes to the Las Vegas area, home to about 2 million of the state's 2.5 million residents and destination for some 40 million tourists a year.

The umbrella Southern Nevada Water Authority, listed in its 2011 EPA needs assessment about \$340 million over 20 years for projects such as improvements to water treatment facilities, quagga mussel controls at Lake Mead and water quality monitoring throughout the Las Vegas valley, authority spokesman Bronson Mack said.

Another \$2.7 billion was included for groundwater development — including the biggest proposal yet: Wells to tap underground aquifers beneath rural valleys straddling the Nevada-Utah state line and pipe the water 250 miles south to Sin City.

The project is opposed by environmentalists and ranchers fearful wells and springs will dry up. Court challenges are pending.

But Mack said the project would help diversify southern Nevada's water portfolio and provide a water source "independent of the drought-plagued Colorado River."