

Vegas seeks OK to pump water from White Pine valley

BRENDAN RILEY Associated Press Writer

September 11, 2006

As backers of a \$2 billion plan to pipe rural Nevada water to booming Las Vegas pressed for state approval Monday, critics renewed pleas to stop what they fear is a repeat of a Los Angeles water grab that parched California's Owens Valley.

The state water engineer's hearings opened with word that four federal agencies were dropping protests to the Southern Nevada Water Authority plans to draw about 91,000 acre-feet of water yearly from the Spring Valley, in White Pine County on the Nevada-Utah border.

The Spring Valley plan is a key element of overall plans to get about 180,000 acre-feet of water a year from rural Nevada. The SNWA hopes to expand that through reuse and other means to about 300,000 acre-feet a year. That's enough water to supply almost 600,000 households.

The National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs and federal Fish and Wildlife Service were called "sellouts" by Simeon Herskovits of the Western Environmental Law Center, which is opposing the pumping plan, for reaching the pre-hearing agreement with the SNWA.

Pat Mulroy, the SNWA's general manager, said a drought cycle has cut heavily into southern Nevada's share of Colorado River water, mandating the need for other sources within the state. She added there's no way a repeat of the early-1900s water grab that dried up California's Owens Valley could occur in Nevada.

"Frankly, I think that's a really bad bet for anyone in Nevada to take," Herskovits said during a break in the hearings, which could take two to three weeks to complete.

The agreement between SNWA and the federal agencies calls for monitoring to prevent over-pumping that could hurt federal interests, and SNWA attorney Paul Taggart said it doesn't cut into any powers of the state's water engineer.

But Bob Fulkerson of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada called the agreement "a toothless watchdog" that lacks any federal penalty provisions in the event of a dangerous drawdown in Spring Valley when water is piped more than 200 miles south to Las Vegas.

Fulkerson joined Herskovits and Matt Kenna of the law center, farmers, ranchers and others who could be affected by the pumping at a news conference held in front of a 15-foot-high bucket with a "Don't Drain Nevada" label.

Advocates of the pumping included Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman, who warned that any indication that his city might not get the water it needs to deal with growth could scare off investors.

"This is what's good for the entire state," said Goodman, adding that reduced investment capital for Las Vegas "will have a resounding effect on the rest of Nevada."

Henderson Mayor Jim Gibson also endorsed the water-pumping, saying Southern Nevada isn't interested in simply "raiding another part of the state" and is moving ahead with many conservation programs to prevent water waste.

While Mulroy said she didn't think the pumping would harm Spring Valley, she said under questioning from Kenna that it wouldn't be in the public interest to allow pumping that would "decimate" the valley.

Mulroy also said a long-term plan that showed adequate water mainly from the Colorado River "evaporated in a blink of an eye" as a result of drought conditions in recent years.

The Spring Valley proposal is among 33 applications filed 17 years ago. While federal agencies are dropping their protests to the plan, remaining foes include rural officials, ranchers, conservationists, Utah officials and the Mormon Church.

Utah officials protested out of concern for plans to pump groundwater in valleys that cross the Nevada-Utah boundary. The Mormon church says groundwater should not be pumped from Spring Valley until it's determined that will not harm the church and other water-rights holders.

Even if the various groundwater applications are granted soon, the SNWA has said the water is unlikely to reach the Las Vegas Valley before 2015.

State Engineer Tracy Taylor will issue a ruling after weighing the testimony and reviewing more than 170 exhibits submitted by the SNWA. Three weeks were allotted for the hearings – although the agreement with the federal agencies could reduce that time.

Witness testimony was limited, resulting in a challenge from dozens of Nevada and Utah residents who wanted to testify. Nevada law bars any new protests to the applications filed in 1989. Opponents of the Water Authority's plans said the law robbed new residents and others of the chance to protect their rights.

0 Comments

Sort by



Add a comment...

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)