

August 18, 2015

TO: Leo Drozdoff, Chairman, Nevada Drought Forum

FR: Bob Fulkerson, State Director, PLAN

RE: PLAN Statement to Nevada Drought Forum

Thank you for your invitation to present to the Nevada Drought Forum. I regret not being able to attend because of a schedule conflict, and submit this letter, addressing the three topics you requested, for consideration by the Nevada Drought Forum.

How has the drought in Nevada affected the environment?

Nevada's desert landscape is more fragile than our boom and bust economy; the drought has made it much worse than most will acknowledge. Scientists can quantify the objective data, but I've spent 50 years rambling around our big, beautiful state, and this is by far the worst I have seen our desert. All over Nevada, we see dwindling rivers and riparian areas, disappearing seeps, springs, and creeks. We should be terrified at what the future will look like if this trend continues.

It's critical for this panel to acknowledge that our state faces permanent, long-term water shortage. Climate change has made the current drought worse. The water storage that Nevada's growth-industrial complex says is available to sate growing population demands won't be enough when more water is demanded and used than nature provides. This will cause further unsustainable groundwater overdraft (which is illegal in Nevada but happens all the time anyway) and prompt ill-advised schemes to build pipelines to rural regions of the state, in turn leading to inevitable ecological destruction of our streams, wetlands and the life that depends on them.

What has your organization done to address drought?

PLAN has worked to educate the public and policy makers to have more respect for the natural environment, since our fates are hitched. Politics and usual and

conventional economics in an era of less and less water is a recipe for extinction. Today, the focus is on getting as much water as we can to support economic growth. If that means building pipelines to suck rural aquifers dry for the benefit of urban growth so be it. Today, such pipelines are in the offing for both northern and southern Nevada. Once they're built, that precious, scarce groundwater will flow inexorably toward money until the aquifers collapse. Then what will the cities do?

It's not as if the economic benefits of this water-guzzling growth are widely shared. They are instead of concentrated in the hands of Nevada's political and economic elites. Nevada is one of only four states where the income for the top 1% grew, while the income of the bottom 99% fell. (The Increasingly Unequal States of America Income Inequality by State, 1917 to 2012)

PLAN spearheaded the effort to place an initiative petition on the November 2008 general election ballot that called for Reno, Sparks and Washoe County to amend the Truckee Meadows Regional Plan in order to reflect and to include a policy or policies requiring that local government land use plans (i.e., master plans and zoning plans) be based upon and in balance with identified and sustainable water resources available within Washoe. More than 73 % of Washoe County voters agreed with us and voted for the initiative petition. An initiative petition is binding, not advisory. But, local governments influenced by developers, never implemented the binding initiative petition. Reno, Sparks and Washoe County land use plans and zoning plans should have been revised to be in balance with the identified and sustainable water resources available within Washoe County. Instead, Reno, Sparks and Washoe County, through the Truckee Meadows Regional Planning Governing Board, said there is enough identified and sustainable water resources available within Washoe County to accommodate Washoe County's projected population in 20 years. In fact, developers, local water planners and TMWA say we have enough water rights to accommodate a doubling of our current population.

Notwithstanding the question of why in the world we'd want to turn Reno into Las Vegas or LA by doubling our population, the thinking that water rights equals' wet water is wrong and misleading.

There is a limited population capable of being supported by known identified and sustainable water resources available within Washoe County and that population number is ±600,000 based upon current water usage patterns. According to the Nevada State Demographer's office, Washoe County can expect 573,220 people by 2032. This drought will show, with bitterly contested evidence, we can't drink paper water rights.

Finally, PLAN also commissioned Dr. Tom Myers to conduct a study on the impacts of gold mining on the flows of the Humboldt River, which is attached. It showed just six mines have dewatered 3.8 million acre feet over the past 25 years, which is ten times more than Nevada's annual allocation from the Colorado River. This is causing ground subsidence, the drying up of thousands of square miles of Nevada land, and will take centuries to recover, if ever, after the pumping stops. This drought will persist long enough for Nevada to view water as more precious than gold.

What major obstacles do you believe exist to overcoming additional levels of water efficiency?

The biggest obstacle to water efficiency is that saving water by consumers is not conducive to the business plan of most water purveyors. It's the same reason NV Energy doesn't actually want its customers to save energy—because if we did they'd lose money.

Also, when people see thousands of acre feet of water per year evaporating from pit lakes, and from ornamental lakes, and when they see urban sprawl going from hillside to hillside, they wonder why they should bother saving water. SNWA's lack of attention to indoor efficiency also makes people question the importance of water saving. Our goal should be nothing less than the lowest per capita use of water in the west—and we've got a long way to go. But first we must commit to sustainability and entomb the idea that we can grow ad infinitum.

Nevada should emulate Ecuador, the first country in the world to recognize the inherent rights of nature. Protection of water has priority over development, mining and industry. In Nevada, it's just the opposite. If we're to survive, we must change that paradigm.

In closing, we admonish Governor Sandoval to appoint new members to this committee representing Tribal, conservation and NGO communities. The homogenous nature of this body ensures a very limited perspective. Additionally, next month's Nevada Drought Summit represents a huge opportunity to involve ordinary Nevadans in the discussion. We would like to know what your plan is to maximize public participation in the summit. Just as the French statesman Clemenceau said, "war is too important to leave to the generals", Nevada's drought is too important to leave to you eight planners. We need everyone's involvement.