

Lawsuits Block Vegas Water Pipeline

SANDRA CHEREB, Associated Press

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) — An environmental group and a coalition of rural interests filed separate federal lawsuits Wednesday seeking to block a massive water pipeline that would pump billions of gallons of water from beneath remote valleys along the Nevada-Utah line and ship it to Las Vegas.

The lawsuits are the first foray into the federal court system in the ongoing battle over plans by the Southern Nevada Water Authority to siphon groundwater from four rural valleys in the central eastern part of the state to quench the thirst of the desert gambling metropolis that is home to 2 million people and hosts 40 million visitors annually.

The Center for Biological Diversity argues in its lawsuit that the water pipeline project would virtually suck rural groundwater dry and turn meadows to dust. The suit contends the project imperils delicate species, including fish, frogs, toads and sage grouse, a chicken-size bird being considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

In a statement, the Las Vegas-based water authority said environmental groups "regularly test the sufficiency of federal environmental examinations made under the National Environmental Policy Act by filing lawsuits."

"We will review the complaint over the next few weeks to determine our course of action," the agency said.

The suit claims the U.S. Bureau of Land Management violated federal environmental laws when it granted the water authority the right of way for the 250-mile, multibillion dollar pipeline project in 2012.

"Congress passed these laws to make sure our public lands are managed on the basis of multiple use, to protect irreplaceable cultural and natural resources for current and future generations," said Rob Mrowka, Nevada representative for the Tucson-based environmental group.

A separate lawsuit was filed by a coalition of local governments in White Pine and Lincoln counties, citizen groups, Indian tribes, environmental organizations and others. It also argues that the BLM failed to adequately analyze effects the water project would have on the rural landscape, livelihoods and cultural resources.

Simeon Herskovits, a lawyer representing the coalition, said scientific modeling shows the pumping would have devastating consequences for the Spring, Cave, Dry Lake and Delamar valleys.

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He said BLM's plans to offset the effects of withdrawing the water are "woefully vague and inadequate" and have little to no hope of success.

Both lawsuits, filed in U.S District Court in Las Vegas, seek an injunction to block the project from going forward.

A push to find more water for Las Vegas has increased in recent years amid ongoing drought in the Southwest and the depletion of the Lake Mead reservoir on the Colorado River to half full. Las Vegas draws about 90 percent of its drinking water from the reservoir behind Hoover Dam.

The federal lawsuits are the latest in years of litigation that until now has taken place in state courts.

In December, District Judge Robert Estes ordered state Engineer Jason King to reconsider his March 2012 approval for the southern Nevada water agency to pump up to 84,000 acre-feet of water a year. An acre-foot is the volume of water needed to cover an acre of land 12 inches deep.

The water authority has filed an appeal of that ruling with the Nevada Supreme Court.

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