

Associated Press

Vegas asking state for rights to more rural water

Engineer has until end of March to issue ruling

LAS VEGAS (AP) - With a crucial water rights decision pending, the Southern Nevada Water Authority is revising its request to Nevada's top water rights official - asking to raise by almost 80 percent the amount of groundwater Las Vegas can draw from rural valleys in counties north of the city.

Documents newly filed with state engineer Jason King cite new data and propose eventually siphoning up to 105,000 acre-feet of groundwater a year from four valleys in Lincoln and White Pine counties, the Las Vegas Review Journal reported Feb. 3.

That would be about 46,000 acre-feet more than King's predecessor gave the authority authorization to pump in separate rulings in 2007 and 2008. But it would be about 20,000 acre-feet less per year than the water authority asked King last fall to approve.

An acre-foot is the volume of water that would cover 1 acre to a depth of 1 foot.

The Nevada Supreme Court struck down the 2007 and 2008 water allocation decisions, leading to six weeks of water rights hearings last year in Carson City.

King has until late March to rule how much water the authority can pump and pipe to Las Vegas through a proposed \$3.5 billion network of pipelines stretching more than 300 miles from White Pine County to Las Vegas. Most of the water would come from Spring Valley, northeast of Ely between Great Basin National Park and the Utah state line.

Water authority officials said 1 acre-foot of water can supply two average Las Vegas homes for one year, but that recycling and reuse could stretch 105,000 acre-feet to supply nearly 360,000 average single-family homes.

Critics said tapping scarce groundwater would decimate the ranching economy and environment of the Spring, Cave, Delamar and Dry Lake valleys and effectively shut out current and future water users across arid rural Nevada.

New Mexico-based environmental attorney Simeon Herskovits, the chief voice of the opposition during last year's hearings, dismissed the water authority proposal as "totally unsustainable and unsound."

Herskovits contends the authority failed to prove it can afford to build the pipeline and failed to demonstrate that

the water is needed in southern Nevada and would be put to beneficial use as required by law.

But deputy water authority General Manager John Entsminger told the Review-Journal that new data collected over the last three years supported the new request.

"Southern Nevada needs to diversify away from its 90 percent dependence on the Colorado River," he said. Las Vegas currently draws almost all its water from the Lake Mead reservoir behind Hoover Dam.

The amount of groundwater pumped from Spring Valley would start at 38,500 acre-feet per year and increase every five years if the pumping is deemed environmentally sound and not in conflict with existing water rights or domestic wells.

"The state engineer has been saying for the past 10 to 15 years that the proper way to develop groundwater is to do this sort of staged development," Entsminger said. "We believe we have provided a conservative plan for development ...that will protect the resource, allow for the collection of new data and provide southern Nevada with a new water supply."