

Counties fear Utah selling out Snake Valley water.

Politics » State says a deal is imminent that will protect ranchers, wildlife.

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Counties from the west desert to the Wasatch Front want Utah to back away from an imminent Snake Valley water deal with Nevada.

Officials in Millard, Juab and Salt Lake counties fear Utah is about to sign away a big share of the aquifer straddling the state line about 60 miles southwest of Delta. Doing so could enable "water mining" for a 285-mile pipeline to Las Vegas, they say, drying up ranches and wildlife watering holes while wafting dust clouds toward the Salt Lake Valley.

"By the time they realize what the impacts are," Millard County Commissioner Daron Smith warned, "it'll be too late."

Eskdale farmer Jerald Anderson said his western Utah community's life is at stake. He and his colleagues there raise

Water retention

County officials on both sides of the Utah-Nevada border fear an agreement between the states will cheat ranchers out of water and send dust storms toward the Wasatch Front. They're asking the states to wait for groundwater studies before inking a deal that could pipe the water to Las Vegas.



Source: U.S.G.S. The Salt Lake Tribune

300 milking cows. They fear Las Vegas' thirst for 50,000 acre-feet a year would sink the water table out of reach of all other users, who combine to use a third as much.

"The water is the basis" for his desert town, he said. "The water is absolutely critical to us being there."

Utah negotiators are close to releasing a draft agreement for public review, said state Department of Natural Resources Director Mike Styler. He won't discuss particulars until the document is public later this summer, but he said it protects existing water users, air quality and fish and wildlife. It would divvy the aquifer between the states, allowing Nevada to funnel its share to Las Vegas if that state's water engineer consents.

Some fear Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge would dry up to the northeast, robbing migratory birds and threatened chub fish of a Great Basin oasis. Styler said the agreement allocates groundwater for the Juab County springs.

Pipeline opponents point out that the Nevada engineer isn't scheduled to hear Southern Nevada Water Authority's case until 2011, so they are unsure why Utah would rush an agreement. The Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Geological Survey are conducting groundwater studies of the area in anticipation of that hearing.

Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon said it's premature to act until scientists resolve how the pumping would affect the aquifer and desert vegetation -- and the resulting dust pollution. Increasing dust storms could cost Utah road-building funds under tightening federal particulate pollution rules.

"It might hurt our air quality and our pocketbook," Corroon said.

Southern Nevada Water Authority argues the fear is overblown. At worst a water drawdown could change the vegetation, not denude the landscape, authority spokesman J.C. Davis said. The agency supports an interstate agreement now.

"The sooner we can iron out all of the details and identify what has to be put in place for Utah," Davis said, "the better for everybody."

Salt Lake County asked to intervene with the Nevada water engineer in reviewing the Las Vegas application but was denied legal standing. That leaves the interstate accord as the county's best chance to win concessions, and the Utah governor's office as the county's arbiter.

It's a potentially touchy situation for Democrat Corroon, who is considering a gubernatorial race against Republican Lt. Gov. Gary Herbert. The lieutenant governor will become governor this month if the U.S. Senate, as expected, confirms Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. as ambassador to China.

Corroon said the counties want a meeting with Herbert, but he will leave it to the Utah Association of Counties to arrange that.

Herbert still is learning about the issue but eventually will discuss the plan with the public and those affected, said Jason Perry, the lieutenant governor's transition director.

"We want to make sure we understand this issue well," Perry said. "It's going to require a lot of public participation."

Snake Valley locals on the Nevada side also worry that a "water grab" could drain their valley. The White Pine County officials wrote to Huntsman in June, seeking a delay, and continue to fear a rushed agreement will ignore science.

White Pine County Commissioner Gary Perea said the states have kept his county "in the dark." He doesn't believe they will be willing to make substantive changes during a public-comment period, and he wishes they would wait for the groundwater studies.

"It would be a better agreement," Perea said, "if they held off at least another year."

Styler said the reason to reach a deal now instead of in 2011 will become apparent when he releases the draft.

"This is Utah's best protection," he said.

Anderson, the Eskdale farmer, argues it's bureaucratic laziness that drives the state's deal making. He and other water users have worked unsuccessfully to delay the state's negotiations.

Utah DNR "from the word 'go' has wanted to come up with a number to divide," he said. "They've always felt their job would be simpler then."

"There's no stomach in the Utah state government to think about this ending up in court and fighting over it. They're looking for an easy bureaucratic solution."

County officials are hearing -- and dreading -- that the agreement will protect water that Utahns now use but cede most of the remainder to Nevada, said Utah Association of Counties attorney Mark Ward, who is representing Juab, Millard and Salt Lake counties in the matter. They are frustrated that DNR and the governor's office have not included them in the talks.

"The counties," Ward said, "have pressed this repeatedly with the state, that they should slow way down on the negotiations."

Styler said a "drilling war" could erupt between the states if there's no agreement, but Ward finds no imminent development threat or reason to get ahead of the groundwater studies.

"I don't see any development in front of the [Nevada] engineer or BLM," he said. "All I see are reasons to delay."

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