

Nuclear power water rights protests triggers public hearing

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By Patty Henetz The Salt Lake Tribune

State water officials have decided to schedule a public hearing on a proposal that would transfer water rights amounting to billions of gallons from Kane and San Juan counties to a company that wants to build a nuclear power plant at Green River.

They're going to get an earful.

Hundreds of people and organizations have filed protests on the action, which would transfer 29,600 acre-feet of water from Kane County and 24,000 acre-feet per year from San Juan County to Blue Castle Holdings, a company working to secure a license to build a power plant. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons. The company would lease the water rights for 70 years.

At risk, say the protesters, are sensitive wildlife and vegetation, the health of the Colorado River and water supplies for millions of Utahns.



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Reclamation say the transfers shouldn't occur.

The wildlife agency says it's trying to keep the roundtail chub, bluehead sucker and flannelmouth sucker off the federal Endangered Species List. Allowing Blue Castle to divert water from the Green River, the agency's protest says, could launch a chain of events that would ultimately inhibit water development across a vast portion of Utah.

Bruce Barrett, area manager for the Bureau of Reclamation in Cedar City, said existing projects such as the Central Utah Project shouldn't have to risk losses to help Kane and San Juan counties secure water rights they couldn't otherwise develop in their own communities.

About \$2.2 billion has been invested in the CUP during the past half-century to provide water from Bountiful south through most of Salt Lake County.

Uintah County's water utility objects to the transfers. Farmers and ranchers don't want to lose their irrigation rights. A host of conservation organizations and Utah residents question the wisdom of

transferring municipal water rights to a private enterprise whose nuclear-power aspirations have yet to pencil out.

Assistant State Engineer John Mann said the hearing date isn't firm but probably will take at least a day in December, January or February.

While water-right application hearings are routine, this will be the first time Utah has considered a proposal that would benefit nuclear-power development. "Very rarely are they as controversial as this one is," said Mann.

Mann said the hearing would stick to the question of water rights, not whether nuclear power should be developed. But Christopher Thomas of HEAL Utah, an anti-nuclear conservation group, said the state must examine what purpose the water would serve and its financial feasibility.