

Return to the [referring page](#).

Las Vegas SUN

February 24, 2004

In plan, LV taps into Lincoln County water

Legislation would create pipelines and spur development

By Launce Rake

[<lrake@lasvegassun.com>](mailto:lrake@lasvegassun.com)

LAS VEGAS SUN

A federal bill being drafted in Washington would tie groundwater sources in Lincoln County to Clark County in a network of proposed pipelines.

The pipelines would be developed by the Southern Nevada Water Authority and Lincoln County and its private-sector partner, Vidler Water Co. The pipelines would be tied together at several points. One is Coyote Springs Valley, the site of a proposed development of 50,000 homes. The area also has wells that would provide water for both the Coyote Springs development and for the thirsty Las Vegas urban area.

Sen. Harry Reid, Nevada's senior senator and minority whip for the Democrats, confirmed last week that he and his staff are working on the bill. He said the focus of the legislation, which would free up about 80,000 acres for development around Lincoln County's four largest towns and set aside 300,000 acres as federally protected wilderness, is now the negotiation of utility easements, including the pipelines for water.

The bill would lay the groundwork for pipelines that could eventually bring water to the Las Vegas Valley. The cost of the pipeline network could range into the billions of dollars and could take years to build.

The bill could be introduced in a matter of a few weeks, he said.

Reid said the Lincoln County lands act is a follow-through to the Clark County Public Lands and Natural Resources Act of 2002. The Clark County act, signed into law in November 2002, put 444,000 acres into protected wilderness while releasing 233,000 acres for other uses, including potential development.

"We have to do it a county at a time," Reid said. He said he is working with Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., and Rep. Jim Gibbons, R-Nev., to draft the bill.

Unlike the Clark County bill, however, one focus of the Lincoln County act would be to provide access to the potentially huge water resources that Las Vegas water officials hope to eventually bring to Southern Nevada.

Southern Nevada Water Authority officials have estimated that there are potentially hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water stored underground in Lincoln County and its neighboring counties of

White Pine and Nye. The water authority has applications pending with the state government to draw groundwater from the three-county region, an area about the same size as the state of Indiana.

Reid said his staff has been working with Lincoln and Clark county officials, the federal Bureau of Land Management, Nevada Power Co. and others affected by any change in land status.

Lincoln County Commission Chairman Tim Perkins said it is important to keep the utility corridors, including those for power lines and the water pipelines, open. It could be very difficult trying to get the rights-of-way for pipelines or other needs later, he said.

"If we don't have the corridors in place there might be a problem with developing those resources," he said.

A map provided to the Las Vegas Sun by the Western Land Exchange Project, an environmental advocacy group based in Seattle, shows Southern Nevada's pipelines tied together with pipelines that would be built by Lincoln County and its partner, Vidler Water.

The Southern Nevada Water Authority and Lincoln/Vidler, which formally entered into a partnership to develop water resources in 1998, had feuded for years over the rights to water throughout Lincoln County. A year ago, both sides agreed to a truce that would split groundwater in the county three ways: Southern Nevada would get a third, Lincoln County would get a third, and both sides would share the last third.

The Legislature followed up in the summer by creating a Lincoln County Water District that could, with Vidler, sell water for development. An element of Vidler's business plan has been to sell water from largely rural areas to urban areas, specifically Las Vegas.

Perkins, however, said Lincoln County's focus is not to sell water to Las Vegas, but to have it available for development in Lincoln County.

He noted that the bill would, if it is not changed in the drafting process, provide 80,000 acres for development around the Lincoln County towns of Pioche, Panaca, Alamo and Caliente. About 250,000 acres in Lincoln County is in private hands, including ranches, so the bill could provide significant space for the development of homes that Perkins believes are the key to Lincoln County's economic development.

"We have no intention of sending water to Las Vegas," Perkins said.

Although the pipeline map shows Lincoln/Vidler pipeline corridors extending 15 miles into Clark County, Perkins said the point of tying his county's corridors with those of the Southern Nevada Water Authority's is to move water from valleys in northern Lincoln County to those areas where development is slated: in Coyote Springs, to the southeast corner of the county near Mesquite, and to the county's towns.

Perkins said the connections also signal a new era of cooperation between Lincoln County and the water authority, the water wholesaler for urban Southern Nevada.

"We've been dealing with the water authority for a long time," he said. "We would hope there is a spirit of cooperation as far as utilizing pipelines together."

Harvey Whittemore, the developer of the Coyote Springs project, which is planned to provide 50,000 retirement homes on a project straddling the Clark-Lincoln county line, said pipelines come together at his site to take water to Las Vegas, to bring water from the north through Coyote Springs, and eventually, if it is needed, the pipelines would bring Lincoln-Vidler water to his development.

"A portion of that pipeline would bring water from the property," Whittemore said. "Clearly pipelines would go through it, and ultimately I could be provided water from Lincoln County through some of the proposed corridors. We're not proposing that we're going to get any water slated for Las Vegas."

Whittemore said the interconnectivity of the pipeline system that tie together Lincoln-Vidler's wells and pipelines with those of the Southern Nevada Water Authority are needed because in the long term, the water authority could be buying Lincoln-Vidler water for Las Vegas.

"You need to be connected if you're going to be able to use the resource," he said.

Vince Alberta, water authority spokesman, said his agency has worked with Lincoln County and Nevada's congressional delegation on the bill. He said the interconnected quality of the pipelines indicates cooperation between the entities.

That cooperation has gotten a boost as the water authority has responded to more than four years of drought that threaten water supplies in Lake Mead, the source of about 90 percent of Southern Nevada's drinking water. The agency is pushing to develop so-called "in-state resources," including groundwater in the northern counties, to slake the thirst of Southern Nevada's rapid population growth.

Some estimates indicate that the ground could hold enough water to supply double Clark County's 1.6 million population.

"Over the last year, as the drought has continued, we have begun aggressively evaluating the development of other options in our resource portfolio," Alberta said. "With that, we have been making an effort to strengthen relationships.

"We have an agreement with Lincoln County. We have made tremendous progress in strengthening that relationship."

Not everyone is happy with the fruits of that relationship. The Western Land Exchange Project has battled land deals by the Bureau of Land Management and is critical of the Clark County Public Lands and Natural Resources Act.

Janine Blaeloch, the group's director, said the earlier bill traded the creation of protected wilderness for the rights to develop thousands of acres of Clark County land.

"Wilderness bill have become these kind of omnibus land bills," Blaeloch said. "We're not anti-wilderness people but we sure don't like to see land development as payment for wilderness designation."

She noted that the bill as now contemplated would move a Nevada Power Co. right-of-way that now goes through the middle of Whittemore's Coyote Springs project. That proposal was also included in Reid's Clark County bill last year, but ultimately deleted.

The Los Angeles Times targeted the deleted proposal in a story last year that focused on Reid's family

ties to lobbyists. Whittemore is one of Nevada's most powerful lobbyists, and he works with two of Reid's sons in the law firm Lionel, Sawyer and Collins.

Whittemore said the proposal is back in the Lincoln County bill, but not because of political influence. He said the utility right-of-way is a reserved corridor not now planned for any use because there are existing lines in place that could serve the area.

"What the L.A. Times did was suggest that it was inappropriate to move the electric right-of-way," he said. "The utility corridor was placed there for purposes of providing electricity on a line. But the line is already there."

Blaeloch is unconvinced, but reserves her sharpest ire for the water issue.

She said the bill as contemplated would allow the water authority and Vidler Water to monopolize water at the expense of existing private users in eastern Nevada and the environment.

"It's going to have a bad effect on a lot of different people," Blaeloch said. "It's great to declare wilderness areas, but if we suck up all the water, what kind of habitat are we going to have left?"

Perkins, the Lincoln County commissioner, said that some of his constituents have expressed similar concerns, but that the concerns are misplaced. He said that before any of the land could be developed, water resources exploited or pipelines built, the local government or water agencies would still have to thoroughly vet the environmental impact.

Alberta agreed. He said that any use of groundwater must be approved by the Nevada State Engineer Hugh Ricci, who is charged with ensuring that new wells do not interfere with existing water rights or the environment.

"Our intent in development of the in-state resources would be to protect the rural lifestyle, ranchlands and the environment," he said.

Ricci has ordered the water authority to pump water in Coyote Springs as one of the early tests of the availability and sustainability of the groundwater resources, Alberta noted.

Any pipelines to come will still have to survive thorough environmental assessments under the National Environmental Policy Act, the bedrock of national environmental law affecting federal lands, he said.

"We're committed to the NEPA process," Alberta said. "We've had a preliminary discussion with some environmental groups, and we will continue that process."

"We're also committed to protecting the lifestyles and the economics of the rural areas. If we can find a solution that is win-win for ourselves and the rural areas, that is a positive."

Return to the referring page.

[Las Vegas SUN main page](#)

Questions or problems? [Click here.](#)

All contents copyright 2004 Las Vegas SUN, Inc.