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Projects could bring untapped water to LV within three years

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Huge infrastructure projects could be built within three years to bring new and as yet untapped water to thirsty Las Vegas, officials of the Southern Nevada Water Authority told the agency's governing board Thursday.

Kay Brothers, deputy general manager for the agency that is the government wholesaler for water throughout Clark County, said growth and drought make the swift development of ground water and new river resources to Las Vegas essential. Wells in northeast Clark County could be the first to be exploited, and could provide 5,000 to 7,000 acre-feet of water annually, but that relatively humble beginning could lead to more ambitious use of "in-state resources."

Eventually, 300,000 acre-feet of water -- enough for about 1.5 million more people -- could run through pipelines to the water authority. One acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, or enough water for a family of five for a year.

Brothers submitted a report to the seven-member water authority board that indicated the work that the water authority staff is already doing, and work that still must be done, to bring the water to Las Vegas. A few years ago, Brothers said, the tapping of the in-state resources looked like it would not be necessary for decades.

"We thought we had until about 2033 to develop the in-state resources," she told the board. "But as we all know, the drought has changed our world."

Urban Clark County, which until the early 1970s was largely dependent on well water for all kinds of uses, now gets 90 percent of its water from Lake Mead. Four years of drought have inspired local water-use restrictions, threats to the amount of water the region can take from the lake, and a realization among water authority policy-makers and staff that other sources are needed.

The region takes close to Nevada's full federally controlled appropriation from the lake for "consumptive purposes" such as drinking, washing and irrigating.

Water authority staffers said that developing the alternate sources will be a huge challenge.

"The development is going to require major and wide-ranging efforts on the behalf of many individuals and organizations," Marc Jensen, water authority engineering director, said. The development of groundwater in northwest Clark County's Three Lakes Valley, the first of several projects, "is an

ambitious project that will involve the drilling of numerous wells," Jensen said.

It could begin supplying water in 2007.

The price tag for the work is not yet known, Jensen said. A second stage project, bringing water from the Muddy and Virgin rivers in northeast Clark County, has been estimated to cost more than \$1 billion. It could begin delivering water in 2011. The water authority has not presented a plan to address paying for the projects.

The third stage of the exploitation of water resources would be to go to Lincoln and White Pine counties, drilling wells and bringing deeply buried water to Las Vegas through hundreds of miles of pipelines. The cost could dwarf even the river projects. The pipelines to the north could begin delivering water in 2014.

Pat Mulroy, water authority general manager, said the efforts to bring the water to Southern Nevada would not and could not negatively affect the communities north of Clark County.

She called the environmental approval process "probably the single biggest issue" affecting the long-term effort, adding that the water authority must provide "a high degree of comfort and confidence that we would not destroy communities and the environment."

"The days of Owens Valley are over," Mulroy said, referring to an infamous water grab by Los Angeles in the 1920s that led to violent confrontations between valley residents, 200 miles from the city, and water agency representatives.

"There can't be winners and losers," she said of Nevada counties' tug-of-war over water. "Everybody has to be a winner."

Mulroy told the board that the water authority plans to create a citizens committee, or task force, to discuss several aspects of the long-term plan to exploit the water resources. The task force, which Mulroy said would meet in July, is to look at: the technical challenges the water authority faces in bringing that water down to Las Vegas; how the water should be used; and the potentially thorny politics of going after the water.

Those in-state resources, and the various efforts to exploit the resources, have sparked huge interest and some concern among some environmental groups. Peggy Maze Johnson, Citizen Alert executive director, said her activist organization, which has focused for years on the proposed nuclear waste dump at Yucca Mountain, will hold a series of meetings across the state to discuss water and other environmental issues.

"We're hearing a lot of people concerned about water, the contamination of it and the amount of it," she said. The meetings would be held in 10 Nevada counties, including White Pine, Lincoln, Nye and Clark counties -- all areas where the water authority plans to eventually extract ground water.

One of the moves already in development that has spurred environmental concern is a bill proposed by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and other members of the Nevada congressional delegation.

The bill would potentially open up thousands of acres for future development in Lincoln County, north of Clark County, as well as set aside thousands of acres as federally protected wilderness. It also is slated to provide right-of-way corridors for the pipelines that the water authority would need to move

water to Las Vegas.

Reid staffers said the legislation is still under development and the ultimate plan is not yet fixed.

"I am working very closely with Sen. (John) Ensign and Congressman (Jim) Gibbons to develop land management legislation for Lincoln County," Reid said in a statement Thursday. "The legislation will serve as a comprehensive conservation and growth plan for public lands."

Ensign and Gibbons, both Republicans, also are working on the legislation.

"Sen. Ensign, Congressman Gibbons and I have been working with local governments and interested citizens to accommodate growth while protecting natural resources for current and future generations of Nevadans," Reid said. "I am hopeful that we will be able to introduce the bill in the coming weeks."

Although the delegation has not come forward with a final draft, the environmental group Western Land Exchange Project is sharply criticizing the proposed legislation.

Janine Blaeloch, the group's director, said the plan is a "quid pro quo" that would set aside some land as wilderness but cause environmental damage through development and the opening of Lincoln County for the exploitation of water resources.

Mulroy, however, said that the development of the water resources will have to pass through two environmental checkpoints. State Engineer Hugh Ricci would have to approve any new wells providing water to Las Vegas, and he must certify that the extraction of the water would not harm existing wells or the environment.

Further, the National Environmental Policy Act would require environmental assessments before the water can come to Las Vegas from or through federal land, Mulroy said.

"Each body of work will complement the other," Mulroy said.

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