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Desert solitaire: Las Vegas bets big on rural water

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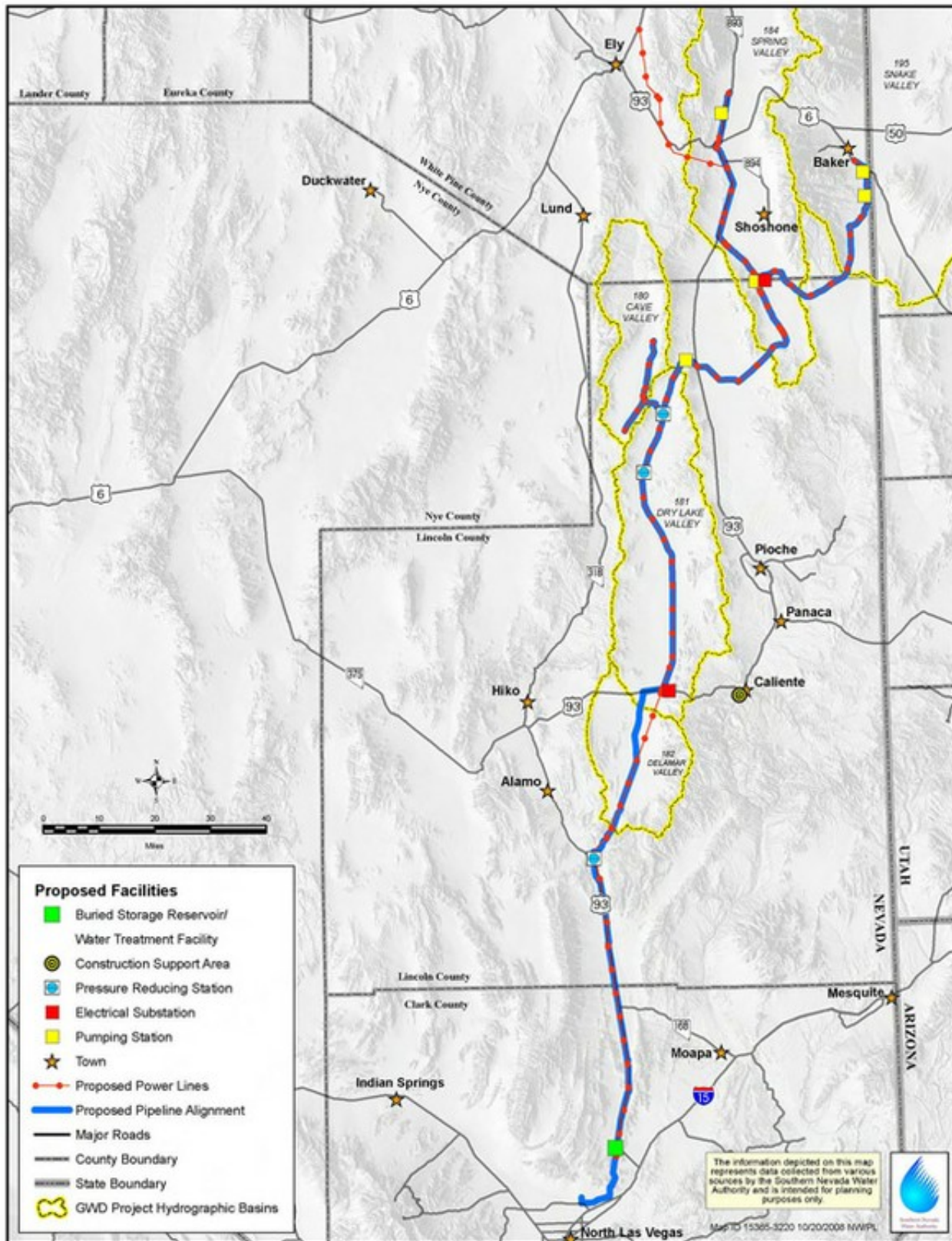
By Heather Hansen, Red Lodge Clearing House

A water mining project that's been a quarter-century in the making took a major step forward last week, when the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recommended approval of a plan for diverting groundwater from three counties in eastern Nevada to Sin City.

In its final environmental impact statement (FEIS), the BLM looks at six alternatives for the Southern Nevada Water Authority's (SNWA) plan to siphon water from several rural valleys and to transport it 300 miles south. The BLM's preferred alternative "F" (the plan they recommend implementing) was crafted, they say, in response to public comments submitted on the draft EIS, as well as input from the SNWA.

Alternative F of the "Clark, Lincoln and White Pine Counties Groundwater Development Project" appears to differ from the proposal submitted by SNWA in a few key ways. While SNWA asked for a 96-inch pipeline to transport 176,655 acre-feet per year (AFY) of groundwater from five basins in northeastern Nevada, the BLM recommends an 84-inch main pipeline to transport up to 114,000 AFY from four of those basins—Spring, Delamar, Dry Lake and Cave valleys. Diverting water from the fifth basin, Snake Valley, which straddles the Nevada/Utah border, is not included in Alternative F. In 2009, the states had reached an agreement on sharing the water in the hotly-contested Snake Valley, but Utah ultimately never signed the deal.

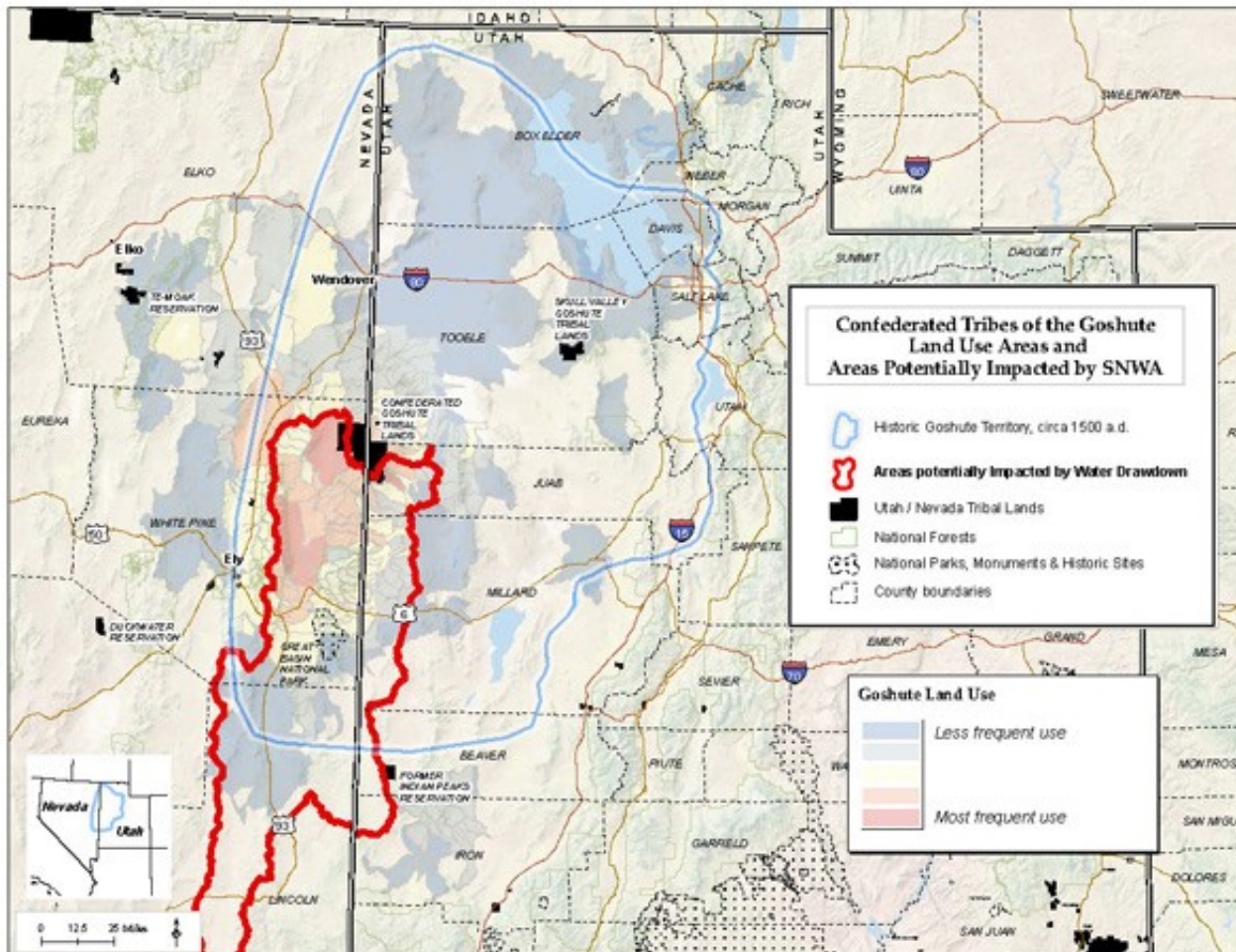
For those who oppose the project overall—and there are many different groups that do—the BLM's recommendation to extract less water from the region is scant acknowledgement of the environmental, economic and cultural issues that have been raised since 2004, the year the SNWA first asked the BLM for the rights-of-way needed to construct the pipelines (and related infrastructure including roads, wells, power lines and production facilities). Since then, the BLM has been reviewing the potential impacts on federal land.



Map of originally proposed pipeline, courtesy of SNWA

Compared to Vegas, east-central Nevada may seem like a no-man's land with resources ready for the taking. It's rural, and part of the Great Basin where snow-shrouded mountains drop to arid lowlands dominated by sagebrush and desert shrubland. Ranchers and farmers live off this land. Other features in the area include several towns, wilderness areas, national forests and Great Basin National Park.

Much of this area is also historic Goshute Indian territory; their present tribal lands are located slightly northeast of Spring Valley. The FEIS states that, “Potential short- and long-term effects to traditional cultural properties, sacred sites, and areas of cultural or religious importance could occur during the construction period.” In a statement released when the project was still in the draft phase, vice-chair of the Goshute Tribal Council, Madeline Greymountain said, “Las Vegas might believe it has hit the jackpot with [this] decision, but the tribe has no intentions of letting this go without more fight. Goshute people are determined to protect the abundant life that exists in Spring Valley. These natural resources are vital to our existence, spiritual balance and well-being.”



Map of Goshute territory, compliments of the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute

The proposed pipeline is estimated to take 12 years to complete and cost between \$3.5 and \$12 billion. Its route crosses the ranges of antelope, elk, mule deer and desert bighorn sheep and would alter the habitats of special status species including the desert tortoise, sage-grouse, pygmy rabbit, western burrowing owl, bald eagle, golden eagle, ferruginous hawk, bats, dark kangaroo mouse, Gila monster and Mojave Poppy Bee. Because of the complex hydrology of the aquifers underlying these valleys, the proposed drawdown of 27.4 billion gallons of groundwater will likely also affect fish and invertebrates in unanticipated ways. The pipeline infrastructure would be visible from two scenic byways and from Great Basin National Park.



According to the Great Basin Water Network, more than 300 individuals, families, farmers, ranchers, local governments (including Indian tribes), businesses and conservation groups from Nevada and Utah have filed petitions for judicial review appealing the Nevada State Engineer's permitting earlier this year of 84,000 AFY of groundwater from the four valleys, which was a key step in driving the project forward.

Given such adamant opposition, why would southern Nevada risk making enemies of its northern neighbors? Desperation and determination are some of the chips laying on the table. Las Vegas currently gets most of its water from Lake Mead, compliments of the overburdened Colorado River. Growing demand and persistent drought has made that tightly regulated supply highly unreliable (by some estimates, Lake Mead will be dry by 2021). The SNWA sees the pipeline as a reasonable, perhaps even ingenious way, to secure alternative sources to meet their needs.

When he ruled on the groundwater rights, Nevada State Engineer Jason King said, "... Southern Nevada needs a water resource that is independent of the Colorado River and...it would not be advisable for the Applicant to continue to rely upon the Colorado River for 90 percent of Southern Nevada's water when that resource is over-appropriated, highly susceptible to drought and shortage, and almost certain to provide significantly less water to Southern Nevada in the future." The allocation was the culmination of a lengthy pursuit; SNWA's predecessor, the Las Vegas Valley Water District, had applied for those rights first in 1989.

No doubt SNWA's leader, Pat Mulroy, would have preferred the BLM approve the original plan, which included the infrastructure to drain groundwater from Snake Valley. But she is nevertheless pleased BLM's Alternative F. Mulroy commented to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, "This project is now sitting out there as a safety net if the [Colorado] [R]iver really goes south...We now have the necessary water resources and the rights of way to protect southern Nevada." One of the reasons she may be happy with that option is that it actually allows for the transport of more water than southern Nevada currently has the right to take. SNWA has the groundwater rights to 84,000 AFY but Alternative F allows for moving 114,000 AFY.

Mulroy still has her eye on getting the Snake Valley water excluded by the BLM's alternative. In their press notice following the FEIS release, the SNWA said, "...this alternative does not preclude the SNWA from pursuing its groundwater applications in the Snake Valley Hydrographic Basin at some future time." The *Salt Lake Tribune* reported on Monday that an e-mail Mulroy sent to SNWA board members recommended taking the issue of Utah's inaction on the 2009 Snake Valley agreement all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The SNWA says the groundwater from the four valleys is enough to water 300,000 households in the Las Vegas Valley (LVV) annually. That seems improbable. According to the Las Vegas Wash

Coordination Committee, a family of five in southern Nevada uses slightly more than one acre-foot (325,851 gallons) of water per year, which puts the figure closer to 84,000 households..

Considering everything that's at risk by draining four valleys, and potentially a fifth in the future, should we be gambling on this pipeline? Not according to Goshute Tribal Chairman, Ed Naranjo, who said recently, "I fear [the Nevada state engineer]'s decision...might literally wipe out our tribe. Goshute people never damaged the earth, we never messed with the balance, but others are out to destroy us, and seemingly for only one reason: the almighty dollar."

The 5,000-page FEIS is now open for public comment before the federal agency issues a final record of decision on the project, likely this September.

Essays in the Range blog are not written by High Country News. The authors are solely responsible for their content.

Heather Hansen is an environmental journalist working with the Red Lodge Clearinghouse /Natural Resources Law Center at CU Boulder, to help raise awareness of natural resource issues.

Image of Spring Valley courtesy the SNWA.