

OPINION

AB 30 threatens Nevada's National Parks and public lands

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Pipeline projects across the nation threaten our public lands and natural resources.

Unfortunately, Nevada is not immune to the danger.

While some states are battling over energy pipelines, Nevada's problematic pipeline would instead carry groundwater extracted from the ancient aquifers surrounding Great Basin National Park. In short, a bill currently before the Nevada State Senate (Assembly Bill 30) enables a pipeline proposal that would irreparably damage Great Basin National Park's water dependent ecosystems where pronghorn, bighorn sheep, mule deer, desert tortoises and countless other creatures call home.

As one of America's most remote national parks, Great Basin's unique ecology, cave systems and dark skies attract more than 150,000 visitors to our state each year. The park is home to Nevada's only glacier, has magnificent stands of ancient bristlecone pines, and has a majestic network of limestone caves, each of which is the result of the region's strikingly unique surface and groundwater hydrology.

AB 30 will destroy these natural splendors by facilitating the Southern Nevada Water Authority's (SNWA) 30-year-old proposal to pump 58 billion gallons of water annually from the eastern Nevada desert to Las Vegas. The water would travel 300 miles in a \$15.5 billion pipeline. While the words "Las Vegas pipeline" aren't written in the bill, the pipeline's implications are written all over it.

By pumping more than 150 million gallons per day, SNWA's groundwater withdrawal would have a devastating and irreparable effect on the region's numerous creeks, springs and groundwater systems. The Bureau of Land Management reports that 305 springs, 112 miles of streams, 8,000 acres of wetlands and 191,000 acres of shrubland habitat in eastern Nevada are all at risk because of the pipeline project. The core of the project shares a border with the national park.

At hearings in both chambers of the Nevada Legislature, not one stakeholder spoke in favor of AB 30. The only supporters who testified in support were state water officials who are also advocating for the pipeline in the courts. No votes are scheduled and we want to keep it that way. If the bill doesn't move, it dies on Friday.

As two retired National Park superintendents, we have seen firsthand how poorly conceived public policies like AB 30 can enable projects that leave irreparable scars on our National Parks. The evidence clearly shows that SNWA's pipeline project would cause widespread ecological destruction unlike anything we've seen.

Today, the Great Basin region consists of an ecologically rich high desert landscape that's home to green valleys, snowcapped peaks, piñon-juniper habitat and the scattered homes of families who have worked the land in harmony for decades. The high-volume groundwater pumping envisioned by the SNWA's project also puts at risk local businesses, from restaurants to ranches.

Surprisingly, acting Nevada State Engineer Tim Wilson is sponsoring AB 30 despite opposition to the pipeline by Governor Sisolak. Wilson's predecessor wrote draft bill last year in his final days before retirement. Even with the minor improvements made in the Assembly, the Senate version of the bill undeniably erodes the foundations of Nevada water law by expanding the state engineer's ability to approve large-scale projects that threaten places like Great Basin National Park.

While cast as an attempt to modernize water law, AB 30 in reality trades more than a century of water security for farmers and small water districts with schemes that would allow those who apply for new water permits – and those with “junior” rights – to attack those with “senior” rights. The bill will enshrine a policy known as “Monitoring, Management, and Mitigation” (3M) plans. That policy is a key component in SNWA's pipeline playbook and for other large-sale water-related projects in the state. The Nevada Supreme Court and the Seventh Judicial District Court have all ruled on 3M, providing safeguards and precedents that AB 30 will erode.

We are not opposed to the state engineer permitting water and seeking to modernize water law. However, we are opposed to the state engineer unilaterally permitting water projects that do not adequately account for natural recharge and that fail to consider the intrinsic value of leaving water in the ground for the benefit of future generations.

We support parks and people -- not destructive pipelines.

Please ask your state senator to kill AB 30.

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