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COMMENTARY: Gov. Steve Sisolak has an opportunity on state water policy

By Kyle Roerink — Executive Director, Great Basin Water Network

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The 2018 election cycle was unlike any other for water politics in Nevada.

The top candidates for governor wisely denounced the Southern Nevada Water Authority's plan to build a 300-mile, \$15.5 billion pipeline to siphon 58 billion gallons of water annually from the heart of the Great Basin in rural eastern Nevada to Las Vegas.

The announcements — from Democratic Gov. Steve Sisolak and his opponent, Republican Adam Laxalt — signified a watershed moment in Nevada politics. Opposition to the pipeline project, which at one time had the unquestioning support of the state's political elites, was the go-to choice on the gubernatorial campaign trail in this election cycle.

The election may be over, but the battle over the pipeline continues, as our drought-stricken aquifers and reservoirs shrink. Sisolak, who served on the water authority board during his time as a Clark County commissioner, is no stranger to the acrimony associated with Nevada water law.

Historically speaking, Sisolak's opposition to the pipeline puts him in good company. The late Gov. Mike O'Callaghan, who was out of office when the authority first started implementing its plans for an eastern Nevada water grab, used his bully pulpit as the executive editor of the Las Vegas Sun to condemn the project in 1989 and then again shortly before he died in 2004.

Seven years later, the Bureau of Land Management concluded that the pipeline would destroy 305 springs, 112 miles of streams, 8,000 acres of wetlands and 191,000 acres of shrubland habitat. The implications of that study are damning. Great Basin National Park, as well as multiple national forest lands, national wildlife refuges and sacred indigenous cultural sites in the region, would be seriously harmed. At least 20 threatened or endangered species would be imperiled. Businesses — from ranchers and farmers to restaurant owners and recreational outfitters — would be jeopardized.

We know something must be done. Climate change has shrunk the Colorado River's flow by 15 percent during the past 100 years. Nearly one-third of Nevada's 256 groundwater basins have more appropriated rights to water than water that is actually available. Our state's population and business community — with their inherent thirst for water — continue to increase.

But with great controversy comes great opportunity. As governor, Sisolak can ensure the pipeline is recognized once and for all as the mirage it always has been and that the Southern Nevada Water Authority shifts its efforts to truly viable and sustainable projects.

For starters, the governor recently selected Tim Wilson as a temporary replacement for the state's top water regulator, retiring State Engineer Jason King. As Sisolak searches for a long-term regulator, he must keep this in mind: The new state engineer will make decisions on the pipeline and other issues that will have long-lasting effects. All candidates for the position must be willing to deny the authority water rights applications for the pipeline project because they would harm senior rights holders and cause grave damage to the environment in violation of Nevada

law.

Next, the governor must be ready to oppose and potentially veto any legislation that would fundamentally alter sound, long-standing bedrock principles of Nevada water law and facilitate the pipeline along with other unsustainable water grabs. Assembly Bill 30, which would encourage and continue irresponsible overappropriation of water, is a bill that must go by the wayside this upcoming session in order to protect the tenets of Nevada water law that have served this state for more than a century.

Lastly, Sisolak must continue to advocate for desalination. Whether he calls upon the Legislature or orders his administration to take action, the state must investigate the potential for collaborative, solar-powered desalination projects with California and Mexico to reduce the burden on the Colorado River and provide additional water for Southern Nevada.

Prudent, holistic and sustainable water resource management will uphold our principles and protect the rights of current and future residents. In this case, it also would ensure that an incoming governor keeps his campaign promise.

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