

Arizona keeping eye on Vegas water-pipeline plan
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A plan to export groundwater from rural Nevada to Las Vegas has provoked a classic Western showdown, a drama rife with references to the movie Chinatown and images of pastoral valleys reduced to dust by greedy gambling interests. None of the water, 65 billion gallons a year when a proposed 285-mile pipeline reaches full operation, would come from the Colorado River basin, which now supplies southern Nevada with 90 percent of its water. Yet the pipeline will likely figure into most of the discussions as Arizona and the other river states gather starting today for their annual water-users conference. If nothing else, the event's Las Vegas setting will make the proposal hard to ignore.

The seven states - Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico - face more immediate issues, such as unresolved differences on a riverwide drought plan and a desire by upstream states to use more of their allocations. But just as all politics are local, most Western water issues are connected. The states share the river water based on a series of agreements and court decisions. If Nevada cannot win approval for its project from its state engineer, officials there would turn their attention back to the Colorado River with renewed attempts to squeeze more water from an already overtapped resource. Those attempts could upend recent agreements to better manage the river and thrust the states into a draining legal battle with no Hollywood ending. "We have to deal with the fact that they are going to run out of water," said Herb Guenther, director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources. "It's to everyone's advantage to help Nevada solve its own problems without looking at redividing the river." Southern Nevada has long known it would run out of water. The state holds the smallest share of the Colorado River, just 300,000 acre-feet, not even one-ninth the size of Arizona's 2.8 million acre-feet allotment. Groundwater reserves offer paltry help. "We have to diversify where our water comes from," said Patricia Mulroy, general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority, which sets water policy for metropolitan Las Vegas. "It has to come from somewhere that isn't part of the Colorado River."

Rural opposition

Rural northern Nevada hardly qualifies as a lush rain barrel for the tapping, but its aquifers hold a store of water that remains largely unused. More important to southern Nevada, most of the water remained legally unclaimed by the 13,100 people in White Pine and Lincoln counties. So the water authority decided to claim the water for Las Vegas, filing for rights in the two counties to nearly 200,000 acre-feet. (An acre-foot of water is 325,851 gallons, enough to serve one or two households for one year.) Nevada's laws allow exporting water from one basin to another, unlike Arizona's, which bar the practice. To move the water from remote desert wells, the water authority plans to spend \$2 billion to build more than 250 miles of pipelines, pump stations and storage tanks by 2014. Las Vegas tried to import rural water once before in the 1990s, secretly filing claims in a scheme quashed after northern Nevadans hired former Arizona Gov. Bruce Babbitt to fight on their behalf. This time, the water authority tried to work with residents and leaders and has brokered deals in Lincoln County that could benefit local communities. Those deals will free up some groundwater supplies for local use and allow the sale of federal lands for development. But groups of ranchers, land owners and environmentalists have still fought back. Foes lined up to testify against the plans when the state engineer held hearings on the first batch of water-rights applications. "The biggest concern, which lies at the bottom of all of our concerns, is that there is not enough water to support the . . . project without damaging our lands, our heritage and our economies in Spring and Snake valleys," said Tonia Harvey, who lives in Baker, a small community in eastern Nevada. Harvey, who testified at the hearings, said evidence already shows that pumping by local farmers and ranchers has dried up small springs with wells that "pump a miniscule amount of water compared to what Southern Nevada Water Authority plans to remove." Opponents painted vivid pictures of dust-filled valleys and drew direct parallels to the way Southern California drained water resources in rural Owens Valley, a water export scheme depicted famously in the movie Chinatown. Southern Nevada officials insist they will not suck the small valleys dry and will work to preserve ranches and riparian areas. Mulroy said federal agencies have agreed to work with the water authority to pump the water responsibly.

Arizona, region impact

With most of the debate focused inward, Mulroy still reminds people that the pipeline plan affects water users beyond the Silver State. Utah, for example, wants to build its own pipeline to carry Colorado River water 122 miles from Lake Powell to reservoirs serving fast growing St. George and Cedar City. The Utah project will require cooperation from other river states, just as Nevada needs help for its pipeline. States can use their allotments within the framework that governs the river, but some specific projects must pass extra review. Utah, for example, would move river water from one basin to another. Nevada would move water across a state line. "If Utah doesn't want to enter into an agreement (with Nevada), they can hold us up," Mulroy said. If that happens, "obviously we're not going to sit quietly and let a Lake Powell pipeline be built." Utah's state engineer will review Nevada's plan, looking at how much groundwater is available in the Snake Valley, which straddles the boundary between the states. "We would like to see Nevada be successful in obtaining additional water," said Dennis Strong, director of the Utah Division of Water Resources. "Before any of us look outside our boundaries, I think we should look at what we have at home." Arizona also must agree to terms allowing Nevada to import groundwater and mix it with Colorado River water, an alliance more likely to produce results. The two states already have signed a water-banking deal that will allow Nevada to use some of Arizona's river water to buy time while the pipeline is under construction. "We wouldn't be giving up anything," said Guenther, Arizona's water chief. By giving Nevada less of a reason to draw more deeply into Lake Mead, "the pipeline would actually reduce the threat of drought. I think it's important for all of us. You have a very thirsty entity there that thrives on a gaming-supported revenue stream. It's hard to deal with the political fallout that comes from a steady revenue source. It's also hard to deny somebody water." Southern Nevada has not threatened to sue, but neither have officials there denied the potential for the fallout Guenther describes. Nevada would not have to go to court to shake things up. It could simply walk away from the drought plan, leaving Arizona to take the hit in case of a shortage. Arizona, which relies on the Colorado for about one-third of its water, gave up certain rights to part of its allocation to win approval of the Central Arizona

Project. That 336-mile canal delivers water to Phoenix and Tucson and is subject to shortage restrictions before any other river allocation is. "To whatever extent Nevada can create water supplies separate from Colorado River, it benefits Arizona," Mulroy said. "If Nevada can't diversify where it gets its water from, we would have a greater case for water from the river. If we have to, we would be pretty strident in demanding more releases from Lake Powell and that makes it more difficult to manage system. We would obviously become a difficult partner to deal with."