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Is pipeline agency up to water study management task?

Nevada official warns that Utah's pick lacks expertise

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A powerful Western water official says the federal agency Utah has chosen to manage environmental studies for the Lake Powell Pipeline project isn't up to the job and could worsen Colorado River shortages.

In a letter sent to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Southern Nevada Water Authority general manager Patricia Mulroy says FERC "clearly lacks the broad expertise of other agencies" to lead the way for the 158-mile pipeline, a complex water supply project that will affect the entire West.

But Utah's decision to have FERC head the project instead of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management - which had been the lead agency for several years - is a way to save time and taxpayer money, said Dennis Strong, director of the Utah Division of Water Resources.

"Folks don't seem to understand we will have an [environmental impact study] that meets federal standards," he said.

Strong also noted that the Southern Nevada Water Authority is working on a disputed pipeline of its own that would pump groundwater from Snake and Spring valleys in Utah and Nevada to Las Vegas, with the BLM as the lead agency.

"I think [Mulroy] will just have to watch the [FERC] process," Strong said. "We look forward to whatever she has to say."

In her letter, submitted as part of FERC's preliminary work on a license and environmental studies, Mulroy said FERC's assertion that construction and operation of the pipeline wouldn't have cumulative effects on any resources was "startling."

It should be obvious, she said, that the massive water transfer - about 100,000 acre-feet - would spur population growth, which in turn would lead to transportation, energy, land and water resource impacts.

"The socioeconomic and environmental effects will in some measure affect all users of water in the system, and may exacerbate shortages in the system," she wrote.

The Colorado River supplies water to more than 50 million people in seven states, most of them in the Lower Basin: California, Nevada and Arizona. Those states also happen to have water rights that are senior to those in Utah, New Mexico, Wyoming and Colorado in the Upper Basin.

Mulroy's concern about the other states that use the Colorado River are probably mostly about Las Vegas, said pipeline opponent Paul Van Dam, a former Utah attorney general and executive director of Citizens for Dixie's Future.

But her arguments are the same Van Dam's organization has already made, and repeatedly.

FERC is a "novice outfit" and the wrong agency to lead the pipeline project, Van Dam said.

"This is the first water project of this magnitude that FERC has ever undertaken. This is really a water delivery project," he said. "Its a situation that I think the state has manipulated and doesn't do justice to the project. You don't send a football player in to hit a home run."

An independent federal agency run by five commissioners nominated by the president and approved by the Senate, FERC regulates the interstate transmission of electricity, natural gas, and oil. It reviews proposals to build liquefied natural gas terminals and interstate natural gas pipelines.

The agency also licenses hydropower projects - and that is key to its involvement in the Lake Powell pipeline, Strong said.

With FERC in the lead, he said, the hydro licensing comes first, then environmental studies that may involve other federal agencies, if they choose to join up under FERC's command. If BLM were the lead agency, FERC's licensing procedures would involve duplication of effort, Strong said.

In an opinion article published May 21 in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, FERC chairman Joseph Kelliher defended his organization, which he said has prepared 1,200 environmental documents for hydroelectric projects and natural gas pipelines during the past five years.

"FERC staff dedicated to working on the environmental review of the Lake Powell Project consists of engineers, wildlife biologists, fishery biologists, anthropologists, a geotechnical engineer, economists and water resource specialists, many of whom hold doctorates in their fields," he wrote.

FERC plans to build small hydro projects inside the 69-inch diameter pipes to harness power from the water as it flows back downhill. The agency says it could produce 300 megawatts of power, enough for at least 225,000 households.

But even FERC acknowledges it will take far more power to pump the water uphill than the little electric projects could yield.

Washington County water officials are hanging on to their 2005 estimate of \$585 million. Citizens for Dixie's Future says the cost more likely will top \$2 billion.