

The Salt Lake Tribune

Pipeline costs: Lake Powell project looks less like smart idea

Tribune Editorial

Article Last Updated: 07/21/2008 06:57:53 PM MDT

More scientists are making more dire predictions about how much the Colorado River water levels could shrink in coming years due to climate change and less snowpack in the Rockies.

At the same time, the estimated price tag on a pipeline to carry 100,000 acre feet of that dwindling water from Lake Powell 139 miles to three Utah counties grows ever bigger. In fact, it has nearly doubled in the three years the pipeline project has been on the Utah Division of Water Resources' drawing board, from its original \$585 million to \$1.1 billion *at least*.

The uncertainty about future water flow and the eventual cost of the pipeline makes the project too risky. Taking that risk would be foolhardy, when conservation of existing water sources could make the pipeline unnecessary.

Opponents of the project, many of whom live in the St. George area, where the additional water would encourage more growth (read: sprawl), say the project could end up costing \$6 billion.

That is speculation, of course. So is the DWR estimate, which does not include debt service on bonds needed to finance the project. The three counties that would benefit from the additional water - Washington, Iron and Kane - will pay off the debt. At least, that's the current plan. But if the cost continues to escalate as steeply as it has so far, it's doubtful the counties would be able to raise connection fees and water rates enough to make the payments. Who would be on the hook then? All Utah taxpayers.

But the most speculative - and most important - of these unknowns is whether the pipeline will be worthless by the time it is built because the 100,000 acre feet of water it is designed to transport no longer flows into Lake Powell.

Climate scientists believe the American West will feel the effects of climate change more intensely than other areas. Some predict the annual mountain snowpack that feeds not only the Colorado but all the other streams Westerners rely on for drinking water and irrigation will shrink drastically or even disappear. That would leave all Utahns holding the bag - an empty bag attached to hefty debt payments.

The more we learn about the potential effects of this project, both intended and unintended, the less appealing it is. Moving ahead with it could be disastrous.