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Utah pushed ahead this week on plans to construct its Lake Powell pipeline, a billion-dollar project that could divert more than 86,000 acre-feet of water from the Colorado River to cities in the state's southern end.

The Utah Department of Natural Resources Division of Water Resources filed a preliminary licensing proposal with Federal Energy Regulatory Commission on Tuesday (December 1, 2015), starting the clock on a 90-day public review of the draft document. A final application is expected to be filed in April.

Environmentalists who have long criticized the proposed pipeline -- which would stretch from Lake Powell to Sand Hollow Reservoir near Hurricane, Utah -- reiterated their objections this week, asserting that the project would further stress the Colorado River.

"The Lake Powell Pipeline is a complete nightmare," Utah Rivers Council Executive Director Zach Frankel said in a statement. "The biggest proposed diversion of the Colorado River during an epic drought, going to the nation's most wasteful water users, with a staggering price tag, just to keep communities outside Utah from using this water."

The Utah Rivers Council has also disparaged the pipeline based on statistics that show residents of St. George, Utah, who would benefit from the pipeline, currently use about 294 gallons per capita -- about twice the daily water use of people who live in Phoenix; Albuquerque, N.M.; and Denver.

Although the preliminary licensing proposal filed this week does not indicate the final cost of the project -- state officials have suggested it is a \$1 billion project, while environmentalists assert it could cost twice that amount -- critics have also questioned its cost and how the pipeline will be funded.

Washington County Water Conservancy District General Manager Ron Thompson told the Salt Lake Tribune late last month that he is confident water districts will find a way to repay a 50-year loan from the Utah Division of Water Resources by raising either impact fees or water rates.

Thompson also told the newspaper that how and where the pipeline is built -- factors that have yet to be finalized -- could also change the cost of the project by as much as 25 percent.

"Until we know which options they're going to allow us to use, it's a little hard to put a price on this project," Thompson said.

Utah legislators first approved the Lake Powell pipeline project in 2006, and critics note that the Division of Water Resources has already spent \$27 million on the application process.

"Adjusted for inflation, the Lake Powell Pipeline will cost as much as it did to make Hoover Dam operational," Colorado Riverkeeper's executive director, John Weisheit, said in a statement.