



P.O. Box 75 Baker, Nevada 89311  
(775) 881-8304

**GREAT BASIN  
WATER NETWORK**

info4gbwn@gmail.com  
GreatBasinWaterNetwork.org

August 19, 2015

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Drought Forum Board:

My name is Abby Johnson, President of Great Basin Water Network. We are a regional, nonpartisan, non-profit organization dedicated to preserving rural water at its source. Counties, Tribes, ranchers and farmers, irrigation districts, small businesses, conservationists, and community members are part of our network. Thank you for inviting us to participate in this meeting. For this process to succeed, we believe it is important for the public and stakeholders to understand what the final work products from the Forum will be, how they will be developed, and how they will be implemented after the Summit in an inclusive and effective way.

### **1. How has the drought in Nevada affected the environment?**

Drought has put all of Nevada on notice: as the driest state in the nation we cannot afford to be complacent. The natural environment is struggling to stay in balance in the face of declining precipitation and rising water use. Our message is simple: Drought should not be used as an excuse to sacrifice one part of the state for another. We are one Nevada and must find solutions so that all parts of the state, including rural areas, can survive and thrive.

It should be clear that there is no “new” water to develop in the West. Many water rights are little more than slips of paper in basins that were overallocated even before the drought took hold. Major water exportations like the Las Vegas Water Grab are not viable solutions. They depend on exploitation of the target area by depleting its water supply. This has never been acceptable, and the drought makes this even clearer. Pump-and-pipe groundwater projects will exacerbate impacts of water shortages from where water is taken, while subjecting urban ratepayers to exorbitant rate increases.

One question we should be asking is: is this a drought or a more long-term climate change where drier is the new normal? The smart thing to do either way is adapt with short-term, mid-term and long-term changes in our water use and management. Will a wet winter deter policy makers from carrying out the systemic changes to sustain Nevada through future adversity? We hope not.

Local agricultural producers are already experiencing the challenges of farming and ranching with a declining water table. Lovelock's farmers are experiencing a fourth year without irrigation water. Sustaining the agricultural base, economy and way of life in Nevada is a necessary part of Nevada's twenty-first century economy, culture, and survival.

## **2. What has your organization done to address drought?**

We oppose the SNWA Groundwater Development Project, better known as the Water Grab, which would bring unacceptable harm to the environment and would poach senior water rights. We have many objections to that project. First among them is that the water is not available long term for massive exportation, rendering it destructive, unaffordable and unacceptable as an option to address drought or expand supply. So far the state's high courts have agreed with that assessment.

We have urged SNWA to pursue alternatives to future water supply needs including desalination and more aggressive conservation, but our efforts and suggestions have not been welcomed.

We supported the Nevada State Engineer's legislative proposals to address overpumped basins as proposed in SB 65 and 81 of the last legislative session. We continue to support changes in Nevada water law that recognize the need for conservation and the importance of water to sustain a healthy environment for wildlife, fish, plants, residents, and tourists.

## **3. What major obstacles do you believe exist to overcoming additional levels of water efficiency?**

Southern Nevada Water Authority has made admirable progress in water conservation. But in the largest city of the driest state, per person water use should be the lowest in the west, and it isn't. In fact, it's about double that of many other Western cities. SNWA points out that its use is much lower once return flow is factored in, but imagine if they used 100 gallons per person per day instead of 205. With return flow they'd be the clear leader in the region and be able to support double the population on today's water use.

Ratepayers in Southern Nevada typically face across-the-board flat rate water increases, removing the conservation incentives that come with tiered rate increases. Conservation pricing works, and it funds investments in enforcement and incentive programs. Large water users shouldn't be given a "bulk rate." The mixed missions of a water authority to both sell and conserve is not lost on us, and we believe it contributes to mixed messages and actions on conservation.

The only option for increasing freshwater supplies is desalination. Outside of this, we can increase the efficiency of using our existing water resources to restore balance to stressed systems. The reuse of wastewater has challenges, but should be part of statewide conservation policies. Gray water and rainwater collection and utilization should be legal and invested in throughout the state. It was brought up in the last meeting, but the treatment and movement of water uses energy, and that energy has a water cost. Gray water systems save consumers money and save communities energy and water. More aggressive indoor conservation retrofits would mean less demand, resulting in more people being able live sustainably on the water supplies that exist today. Every locality should be setting bold yet reasonable conservation goals. Southern Nevada's is due for a revision.

The "use it or lose it" caveat embedded in Nevada water law does not provide flexibility for agricultural producers who want to conserve by pumping less in a drought crisis. Change water law to incentivize water savers and exempt them from "use it or lose it" requirements.

The evaporation rates of Lake Mead and Lake Powell are astounding. Pursuing technology to store more water underground is essential. And how about phasing out the ornamental lakes that serve no purpose for the vast majority of residents or tourists, but lose many acre feet of water to evaporation?

Nevada law allows the die-off of plants to capture the water they would use. But this extermination has consequences too, including erosion, subsidence, and fugitive dust. This policy should be re-examined to ensure we do not become overzealous in taking the water our environment needs.

Finally and foremost, it is past time for all parts of Nevada to have water-smart growth management ordinances. It is unacceptable, unsustainable and yes, unhealthy, to set no limits on growth in the desert. The public perception is that water conserved will simply be used by developers to support new growth instead of protect the environment and preserve quality of life. As in other areas, let's adapt successful approaches by other arid communities to make it work in Nevada. We should be able to, but can't, answer a simple question: how many people can today's proven water supplies and conservation techniques support?

Nobody has a spotless record on water use, but now we have enough information in front of us to make a clear choice between gambling the future of our environment and economy on growth and water theft, or showing the responsible restraint needed to guarantee that future generations can enjoy a Nevada whose character is largely preserved. We hope this Forum will help our state make the right choice.