

As fight over proposed Las Vegas pipeline persists, remember Owens Valley

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Any visitor to the small border town of Baker, Nevada will likely come across a phrase that references the Eastern Sierra: Remember the Owens Valley.

The famed California valley is a victim of William Mulholland's Los Angeles Aqueduct — a project made famous by its rapacious desertification of Owens Lake and surrounding areas. That damage, which continues to cost Californians millions of dollars per year for mitigation, explains why many Nevadans hope we learn an important lesson from our neighbor to the west.

The Southern Nevada Water Authority's Las Vegas water grab and pipeline — which has been in various stages of development since 1989 — would forever tarnish public lands and waters in Eastern Nevada and Western Utah.

The idea is a direct descendant to the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

Litigation currently working through the courts could give the Vegas proposal what it ultimately needs: water to put in a giant pipe. Nevada and Utah counties, tribal governments, the LDS Church and the Great Basin Water Network will be back in Nevada's Seventh Judicial District Court this month facing off against the SNWA and the Nevada state engineer in order to stop the project from degrading and endangering the Great Basin by pumping 58 billion gallons of water annually and sending it 300 miles via pipeline to Las Vegas.

What we know about the potential effects of the Vegas project resemble the destruction endured in the Owens Valley. It's undeniable that both projects are unsustainable for plants, wildlife and humans. Both jeopardize the sovereignty of tribes. Both utilities have spent millions on agricultural

operations in support of the project. Both projects waste taxpayer and ratepayer funds in litigation. Both big-city utilities hack away at local control in rural communities.

Dust storms plague Owens Valley and its air quality. The Vegas project would do the same in the heart of the Great Basin, adding an extra 20,000 tons of dust to the air annually and distorting pristine nighttime skies. Wildlife, wild places and plant life all suffer thanks to LADWP. The BLM expects more than 190,000 acres of habitat and 8,000 acres of wetlands would be irreparably harmed in the Great Basin by SNWA.

The threats are even more pronounced for species like sage grouse and places like Great Basin National Park and Pahrnagat National Wildlife Refuge.

Human life, too, would be irrevocably changed. Farms, ranches, recreation, hotels, hunting and other businesses would face peril. Places of prayer for tribal members would vanish. The scenic views enjoyed by travelers on Highway 50 and Highway 93 would be forever scarred.

Then there's the capital cost.

The \$15.5 billion price tag for SNWA (2011 dollars) is one of the reasons why southern Nevadans can expect water bills to skyrocket. But they cannot expect the water to last forever.

The water SNWA wants largely comes from aquifers that were created during the last ice age. Once that water is gone, it is never coming back.

We're not advocating to merely keep this project out of the Great Basin. We're advocating to keep it out of the picture forever. Fortunately, Las Vegas residents have options.

The SNWA is a national leader in conservation measures, cutting per capita water use by 46 percent and Colorado River water use by 25 percent since 2002, respectfully. The utility regularly plans for upgrades to infrastructure and technology. It also incentivizes turf removal and in-home efficiencies. SNWA positioned Nevada well when helping to pass federal legislation to protect supply on the Colorado River earlier this year. The Water Authority continues to maximize its share of the Colorado River with recycling and storage practices, ensuring a steady water supply for

decades to come. On top of that, the possibility of desalination is no longer half-baked.

Nevadans always talk about not becoming the next California. Stopping the Las Vegas Pipeline and water grab would certainly be one way to keep that from happening.

As pipeline opponents say: Remember the Owens Valley.

Kyle Roerink is the executive director of the Great Basin Water Network.