

# The Nevada Appeal

## Editorial -- Abby Johnson: Las Vegas Water Grab not dead yet

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What about the water?

Today, one in five of Nevada's 256 water basins are overappropriated, meaning that there are more water rights approved than there is water available.

Earlier this month, opponents of the Southern Nevada groundwater development project – known as the Las Vegas Water Grab – celebrated an unprecedented victory. After 12 years of hearings and legal appeals, the State Engineer finally denied Southern Nevada Water Authority's water applications in four key valleys in eastern Nevada – Spring Valley just west of Great Basin National Park as well as Cave, Dry Lake and Delamar Valleys in White Pine and Lincoln Counties.

But it's not final. In an unusual move, the State Engineer intends to appeal his own ruling. Like all water issues, it's complicated but in essence he didn't agree with some of the judge's instructions to him for a ruling do-over. The fight that began nearly 30 years ago in 1989 is far from over.

Let's review some water grab facts. The full water exportation project includes Snake Valley which is bisected by the Nevada-Utah state line and is home to Great Basin National Park. Southern Nevada Water Authority wants to pump more than 175,000 acre feet of water per year, every year, to pipe to Las Vegas to support uncontrolled growth and sprawl into the future. One acre foot is the amount of water to fill football field one foot deep in water, about 325,000 gallons. In 2011, the 300-mile pipeline project was projected to cost \$15.5 billion, exclusive of mitigation costs, which will be astronomical.

The impacts to agriculture, communities, and the tourism and recreation economy would unfold in a slow motion disaster as the environment slowly collapses. The Bureau of Land Management's environmental impact report highlighted the destruction: 305 springs, 112 miles of streams, 8,000 acres of wetlands, and 191,000 acres of shrubland habitat for sage grouse, mule deer, elk and antelope. The water table will drop, in places by more than 100 feet, creating massive land subsidence.

With groundwater-dependent plants dead, windblown dust will obscure pristine night skies.

While denying their water rights, the State Engineer approved SNWA's plan for monitoring management and mitigation of the inevitable effects from extreme pumping, despite the fact that the monitoring and mitigation plans contain no real concrete assurance that predicted impacts will or can be mitigated. Opponents of the Water Grab contend that the impacts are so massive that monitoring, management and mitigation is a promise that cannot be kept. Once the pipe starts sucking water south, the environmental impacts from pumping are likely unstoppable.

Nevada water law has generally served us well over the past 100 years. But the State Engineer's "maximize beneficial use" refrain may be better suited to the 20th century appetite for expansion than the 21st century need for sustainability in the face of climate change. With one in five basins already overappropriated, does it make sense to keep pushing other basins to the brink or beyond?

As Nevada leaders grab at growth like hungry teenagers at a casino buffet, water is barely discussed. It is not an easy or popular topic for politicians or the public, but in the driest state in the nation, it should be asked at every campaign gathering and candidate forum.

What are the water needs for the future? Where will the water come from? Is sustainable water use the new standard? Who pays for the water development? How will it affect ratepayers and residents across the state, now and in the future? Can we afford expensive water development? Are we planning and adjusting for the impacts of climate change on our resources? And do you support or oppose the Southern Nevada pipeline project and why?

We've heard very little so far from the candidates who want to lead us for the next four years. Folks, speak up and ask, "What about the water?" Water is life!

*Abby Johnson is a resident of Carson City, and a part-time resident of Baker, Nevada. She consults on community development and nuclear waste issues. She is also the president of Great Basin Water Network, one of the organizations opposing the Las Vegas Water Grab. Her opinions are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of her clients or organizational affiliations.*