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Nev. farmers fighting water plan

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AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File

Construction workers build a luxury home at the construction site of Toll Brothers in Henderson, Nev., in this file photo made on Tuesday, May 22, 2007. The Southern Nevada Water Authority wants to draw more than 11.3 billion gallons of groundwater a year from from the Delamar, Dry Lake, Cave valleys and all in central Lincoln County. That amount of water, expanded through reuse and other means, could supply more than 100,000 homes in the fast-growing Las Vegas area.

CARSON CITY, Nev. -- Roderick McKenzie and other central Nevada farmers fear booming Las Vegas is going to suck their farmland dry.

They are fighting a plan to pump billions of gallons of water south across the desert for use in the fast-growing Las Vegas area, saying it would eat up groundwater supplies and spell the end for ranchers and farmers in rural valleys.

"It's not a smart thing to let the state engineer go into a valley and take water that's probably going somewhere else," McKenzie said. "Once the water table starts to drop it will continue to drop."

The Southern Nevada Water Authority wants to draw more than 11.3 billion gallons of groundwater a year from the Delamar, Dry Lake and Cave valleys, all in central Lincoln County and along the route of a proposed water pipeline that will stretch 250 miles across the state like a giant straw.

That amount of water, expanded through reuse and other means, could supply more than 100,000 homes in the fast-growing Las Vegas area, authorities say.

But McKenzie, who heads Lund Irrigation & Water Co., said water under nearby Cave Valley can be linked to subsurface water in the Lund area and a big drawdown in one area could hurt the other.

He is worried because ranchers in his company run cattle in Cave Valley in the summer and fall and depend on the springs.

"That's the whole basis of our protest," he said. "It's not knowing where the water is coming from in the first place, and not knowing where it's going."

The state's share of the Colorado River cannot sustain continued growth around Las Vegas, home to about three of every four Nevada residents. Drought has placed a greater strain on the river's supply.

After initially opposing it, Lincoln County has agreed to go along with the water authority plan, which is part of a \$2 billion water pipeline project to tap into water around Nevada. The agreement states which groundwater basins in the county can be developed.

"This is very important because it's a critical part of our overall groundwater project," said water authority spokesman J.C. Davis.

Davis said Lincoln County's support will help during the state engineer's hearings on the plan. A prehearing conference has been set for Aug. 28 by the state engineer and the water authority has asked for Jan. 14-18 hearings.

Davis said the pumping will only take the amount of groundwater that is naturally replenished each year in the valleys. But opponents include the federal Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Ranchers and other landowners who oppose the plan are getting support from groups such as the Western Environmental Law Center, Great Basin Water Network and the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, among others.

The water authority's theory on available groundwater is challenged by Susan Lynn of the Great Basin Water Network, who said the water "recharge" in the area is not substantial and pumping will dry up springs there and in adjacent areas.

"They don't call it Dry Lake Valley for nothing," Lynn said. "This is just simply mining of water. Once it's gone, it's gone."

The water authority's eventual goal is to tap into enough water in rural Nevada to serve more than 230,000 homes, besides about 400,000 households already getting the agency's water in the Las Vegas area, one of the fastest growing regions in the nation.

The agency hopes to begin delivering the rural groundwater to Las Vegas by 2015.

Economic analyst Jeremy Aguero said an inadequate water supply would have wide-ranging consequences, including a slowdown in investments and construction, reduced public services and other problems that could ripple across Nevada.

"Imagine a situation in which developers believed tomorrow couldn't be a better day because development would be stalled by insufficient water resources," Aguero said.