BLM_NV_NVSO_GWProjects

From: Paul Tusting <paultusting@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, October 11, 2011 2:27 PM
To: BLM_NV_NVSO_GWProjects; Dow, Kimberly D
Cc: psplumley@comcast.net
Subject: SNWA BLM EIS Public Comment - Paul Tusting
Attachments: BLM EIS Notes_Final_Paul Tusting_20111011.pdf

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
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Hi Kim,

We met at the 8/11 SLC hearing about the SNWA ROW application.
I just wrapped up my public comment (attached).
If you have a free second please confirm it can be accepted in this form, as I am also wondering if I need to throw a copy in the mail.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on this issue.

Sincerly,
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October 11th, 2011

Bureau of Land Management
Nevada Groundwater Projects Office
P.O. Box 12000
Reno, NV 89520

RE: Clark, Lincoln and White Pine Counties Groundwater Development Project

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Paul Tusting and although I live in Salt Lake City, I have spent a tremendous amount of time over the last 10+ years in the northern region projected to incur a ground water drawdown as a result of the current Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) proposal. I participated in the Salt Lake City BLM EIS Hearing on August 11th, and very much enjoyed speaking with representatives from both AECOM and the Nevada BLM office.

I understand that the actual water rights for this project fall under the jurisdiction of the Nevada State Engineer (NSE), and the BLM is only responsible for the Right-Of-Way (ROW) application for the proposed action since the vast majority of the affected area is under their management. I also understand that there are aspects of the ROW that are outside of the BLM's control, specifically that Congress has directed them to grant ROW's to SNWA in Lincoln and Clark counties through the Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation, and Development Act of 2004.

I am writing today to urge the BLM to grant the minimum ROW required by law (Alternative D), specifically withholding ROW rights in Spring and Snake Valleys located in White Pine County, NV, for the following reasons:

1. A drawdown in those valleys would result in complex and long-term impacts to the region, many of which are nearly impossible to predict.

2. Regardless of best efforts, an EIS conducted for an area this large, located 300-500 miles from both the firm performing the study and the managing governmental agency reviewing it, will result in valuable and unusual resources from being properly inventoried.

3. Approving ROW into the northern regions of the proposal will adversely affect a population significantly larger than the one it is meant to benefit.

4. As a result of the items above, granting ROW rights beyond the minimum required by law would be in directly conflict with the BLM Mission Statement.

I would like to expand on all four of these items below focusing on impacts related to projected water table drawdown, and for the moment, not taking into the account the significant impacts associated with installing and maintaining the required infrastructure.

ITEM 1: Complex, Unpredictable, and Long-Lasting Impacts

Talking to hydrologists from AECOM and reviewing the drawdown figures shown in the draft EIS, it seems that the valley floors will be the most severely impacted, with the surrounding foothills and benches have some impact, and the higher elevations having minimal impact from the proposed action. As a result, I am going to focus my comments on the lower elevation areas.

Having come from a background in Quality Assurance, I know that there is a big difference between interpolating between known data points, and extrapolating beyond what is known. Data seemingly as simple annual precipitation can have subtle but crucial factors hidden within the numbers. For example, in deserts this far north, precipitation that falls in the winter months as snow can be lost to sublimation, having never made it into the soil. During spring and summer cloudbursts, which make up a large percentage of the annual perception, the short and intense storms make it difficult for hillsides to absorb much of the moisture as it travels to the hardpans. Together these phenomena could make a given precipitation rate seem a lot higher than it actually is.

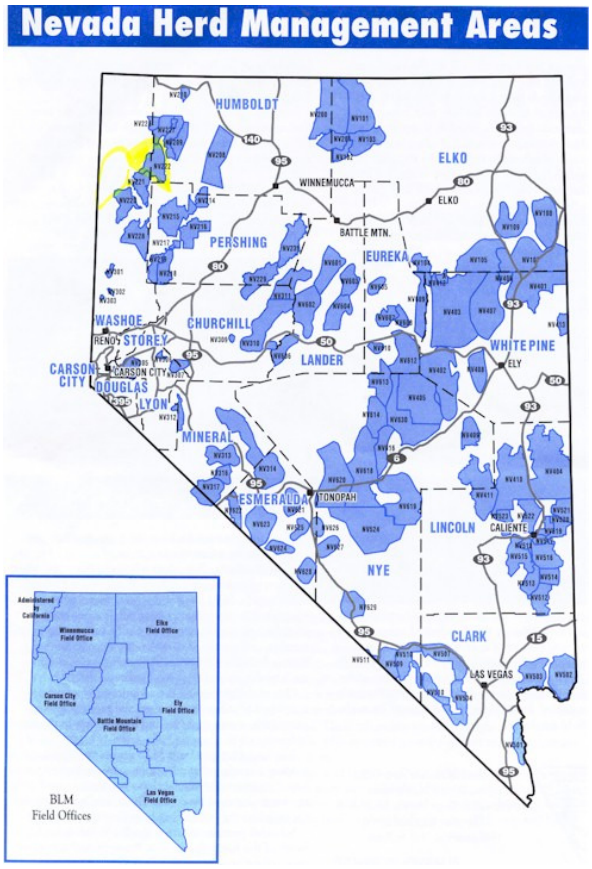
Likewise, modest drawdown numbers can still impact the environment in hard to predict manors. For example, a certain plant's root system could extend deep enough to reach a slightly lower water table, but this is not the whole story. Nitrogen is just as critical to the plant's growth as the water itself, and if the moisture content of the upper layers of soil containing the Nitrogen is depleted, the plant cannot access it. Another example of how a slightly lower water table can have hard to predict consequences involves rodents, which make up a significant percentage of the mammal population in these regions and serve a critical role in the area's food chain. Much of their water is absorbed through their food, specifically seeds. When stored in a humid burrow, seeds can double their water content through osmosis, providing a key source of moisture for rodents. Slight changes water table could change this dynamic, impacting the birds of prey and larger carnivores which depend on this food supply.

These are but a few of the potential impacts which would be hard to model and evaluate until it was too late.

ITEM 2: Creating Complete Catalog of Resources Impacted

Despite the best efforts of AECOM and the Nevada BLM to accurately and completely inventory the resources that would be impacted as a result of the proposed action, we are talking about a region the size of many eastern states, with one of the lowest population densities in the country.

A prime example has to do with wild horses in the region. Section 3.13 of the Draft EIS limited impact to two Wild Horse Herd Management Areas (HMA), yet the map below from the former Nevada BLM website shows far more than two HMA in the region in question. Nevada has more wild horses than any other state and when combined with Utah, has well over half of the nation's current wild horse population.



I mention Utah because the projected drawdown contour crosses into a number of Utah counties, including Beaver and Iron, although they are not listed in the agencies cooperating with the SNWA Ground Water EIS. I bring up these counties specifically, because there is a special resource in this region that does not appear in the EIS. The Sulphur Herd Management Area contains one of the most (if not the most) genetically pure populations of Spanish Mustangs in America. Not only is their protection mandated by Congress by the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horse & Burro Act, but this specific herd is monitored and studied by a number of civil groups including:

* Sulphur Springs Horse Registry (sulphurspringshorseregistry.com)
* Sulphur Horse Registry (sulphurhorseregistry.com)
* American Sulphur Horse Association (americanspanishsulphur.org)
* Save Our Sulphurs (saveoursulphurs.com)
* Sulphur Horse Ranch (sulphurhorseranch.com)
* KW Mustang Ranch (kwmustangranch.com)

When I mentioned the existence of this herd to the Nevada BLM and AECOM staff at the SLC Hearing, no one was aware of it. This is a prime example of how difficult it is to accurately compile the unique resources of a region this expansive, sparsely populated, and which is largely unknown to the outside world.

ITEM 3: Impact to Wasatch Front and other Utah Communities

Although it is clear that much of the water in Snake Valley belongs to Utah, has been utilized by rural communities there dating back to before the Civil War, and Las Vegas is far from cutting edge with conserving the water they already have, water rights are not at the root of this discussion, since it is outside of the scope of the BLM EIS.

What is within the scope of this discussion is how the proposed action would impact air quality of the 80+% of Utah's population that lives downwind of White Pine County along the Wasatch Front. Salt Lake City is already ranked sixth in the country for cities most polluted by short-term particle pollution according to ABC News. A drawdown in water table in Snake Valley will inevitably reduce plant ground cover and allow more dust to be blown by the prevailing westerly winds towards a population much larger than the one the water will supply.

Being an agency of the federal government, the BLM's responsibility does not stop at state boundaries. In this particular scenario, the modest benefit for a few hundred thousands people in Southern Nevada could severely impacted the air quality for millions in Utah.

ITEM 4: BLM Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the BLM is "to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations." To put this project into perspective, it is worth looking into how some of these words/phrases apply to the current proposal.

Sustain- Nothing about this project is sustainable. The groundwater in the aquifers will not be recharged as quickly and it is depleted, hence the drawdown of water table.

Health- The proposed action would in no way improve or sustain the health of the land impacted by the ROW.

Diversity- The "Desert Islands" of the Range and Basin landscape were formed as the Ice Age receded and dry valley floors separated genetically isolated populations. The result is a number of endemic species in the region which are particularly sensitive to changing environments. A drop in water table will put further pressure on these populations, likely decreasing the region's diversity.

Productively- The vast majority of the jobs and economic benefit for the regions where the proposed pipeline infrastructure will be located is short-term at best.

Present/Future Generations- Due to its geographic location (sandwiched between Lake Mead and mountains), the growth of Las Vegas is inherently limited yet it still cannot live within its own means (Colorado River Allocation). The current proposal will put the health of a much larger population at risk for the short-term benefit of a much smaller population.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the BLM for the opportunity to comment on the Clark, Lincoln, and White Pine Counties Groundwater Development Project Draft EIS. I hope the information above will bring an alterative perspective on some of the predicted and possible impacts of the proposed action. I also hope that the BLM will stay true to their mission statement and not grant ROW beyond what they are obligated to by law.

Sincerely,

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