

Southern Nevada
Water Authority

**ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT
RESOURCES DEPARTMENT**

1900 E. Flamingo Road
Las Vegas, NV 89153

Main 702/862-3400
Fax 702/862-3470

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November 16, 2005

Gene Drais, Project Manager
U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Ely Field Office
HC33 Box 33500
Ely, Nevada 89301

Dear Mr. Drais:

**SUBJECT: DRAFT RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AND
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT FOR THE ELY
DISTRICT**

The Southern Nevada Water Authority (Authority) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/EIS) for the Ely District. The Authority is a political subdivision of the State of Nevada, created in 1991 under Nevada State law pursuant to a Cooperative Agreement among its seven member agencies. The Authority's member agencies, which are water and wastewater agencies in southern Nevada, include: Big Bend Water District, City of Boulder City, City of Henderson, City of Las Vegas, City of North Las Vegas, Clark County Water Reclamation District, and Las Vegas Valley Water District. The Authority's mission is to manage the water resources of southern Nevada and develop solutions that will ensure adequate future water supplies for the Las Vegas Valley.

I. Introduction

As stated in the document, the purpose of the RMP/EIS is to provide "direction and guidance for management of approximately 11.4 million acres of public land located in Lincoln, Nye, and White Pine counties in eastern Nevada that is administered by the U. S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Ely Field Office". The RMP/EIS will "provide direction for management of renewable and nonrenewable resources found within the Ely District" and will "guide decision-making for future site-specific actions". The preferred alternative (Alternative E) supports implementation of the Eastern Nevada Landscape Restoration Project while still providing for resource uses, therefore, the Authority supports adoption of the preferred alternative with the changes described in this letter.

The Authority has applied to the BLM for rights-of-way to develop and convey groundwater within the Ely District, as part of its Clark, Lincoln, and White Pine Counties Groundwater Development Project. The BLM is currently preparing an

EIS for this project. The Ely District RMP/EIS and the final decision made by the BLM will be directly relevant to the Authority's groundwater project.

II. Utility Corridors

The Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation, and Development Act of 2004 (LCCRDA) became law on November 30, 2004 (Public Law 108-424). As part of the LCCRDA, Congress directed the BLM, through the Secretary of the Interior, to establish a 2,640-foot wide utility corridor in Lincoln County and Clark County, Nevada as generally depicted on a map included in the congressional record. Although the BLM does not have discretion on the designation of the utility corridors, the BLM does have discretion on final alignment and location of the utility corridor. On October 27, 2005, the Authority submitted to the BLM a recommended detailed delineation of the utility corridor alignment, which corresponds with the location of the Authority's proposed groundwater project, which was the objective of the LCCRDA utility corridor. A copy of that submittal, including maps and a disk containing the GIS shapefiles, is enclosed. The Authority requests that the BLM consider and adopt this detailed alignment delineation of the utility corridor in the RMP/EIS.

Furthermore, although the RMP/EIS describes and depicts the LCCRDA utility corridors, it does not appear to actually designate them. The Authority believes the RMP/EIS should be revised to make it clear that the BLM is establishing the LCCRDA-mandated utility corridor, following the alignment identified in the Authority's October 27, 2005, submittal, and should address the environmental impacts of such establishment in the supporting National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) document.

The Authority recommends selection of the Alternative C proposed Spring Valley Utility Corridor alignment, identified in the RMP/EIS, at a width of 0.5 mile. This alignment follows the existing Highway 893, and is compatible with the Authority's proposed groundwater project alignment.

The Authority also recommends the establishment of a utility corridor into Snake Valley consistent with Authority's current proposed action to develop and convey groundwater within the Ely District. Establishing alignments within the RMP/EIS consistent with the Authority's right-of-way applications will help avoid amendments to the RMP/EIS in the future.

III. Water Resources

Groundwater

The perennial yield and committed resources data used in Section 3.3 are over 30 and 13 years old, respectively. The cited reference for perennial yield given in Table 3.3-1 (Nevada Division of Water Resources 2003) is Appendix A-2 of the Nevada State Water Plan. Appendix A-2 does not provide perennial yield information. The perennial yield numbers given in the table correspond to Scott et al. (1971) and, therefore, are at least 30 to 40 years old. Page 3.3-1 cites

Nevada Division of Water Planning 1992 as the source for the committed resources data. Therefore, that data is at least 13 years old. The accurate age of the data needs to be cited in the text and noted on tables along with an explanation of whether the totals include or exclude supplemental duties to help clarify what the totals actually represent. A list of references that contain more recent hydrological data is enclosed.

Table 3.3-1 is subdivided by county. This leads to redundancies, because hydrographic areas cross county lines. Nevada Division of Water Resources (NDWR) does not identify hydrographic areas by county, and therefore, they should not be represented in this manner in the table. In addition, NDWR uses the term "hydrographic areas" not "basins", and that should be corrected in the second column of this table.

Perennial yield and committed resources, described in the third paragraph on page 3.3-1 and Table 3.3-1, are two separate issues that do not directly correlate, and should be discussed separately. Perennial yield is the amount of usable water in a groundwater aquifer and is determined by a variety of factors, including artificial recharge, natural discharge, and natural recharge. Committed resources are the total volume of permitted, certificated and vested groundwater rights which are recognized by the State Engineer and can be withdrawn in a groundwater basin in any given year. By combining the discussion of these distinctly separate topics into one paragraph, it confuses a hydrological process with a regulatory one.

The perennial yield information listed in Table 3.3-1 exclusively uses Scott et al. (1971), which summarizes water availability in the shallow aquifers of the Ely District based on various U.S. Geological Survey Nevada Reconnaissance Reports or Nevada Water Resources Bulletins from the 1960s and 1970s. Numerous studies have been made since then that also focus on perennial yield or recharge estimates for hydrographic areas in the Ely District. These reports include Nichols (2000) and various reports by the Authority and the Las Vegas Valley Water District. These reports often provide perennial yield values or recharge estimates that differ from the values provided by Scott et al. (1971).

The perennial yield values in Table 3.3-1 should be listed as a range that incorporates both older and newer sources of data.

Listing the perennial yield values as ranges avoids misleading the reader to believe they are absolute values. For example, in Snake Valley, the perennial yield value cited in Table 3.3-1 originates from the report titled "Water for Nevada – Report 3" from the State of Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. In that report, perennial yield for Snake Valley is listed as > 25,000 afy not 25,000 afy. The report also cites Reconnaissance Report No. 34 as the source of the data for Snake Valley. Reconnaissance Report No. 34, however, states that the perennial yield of Snake Valley is approximately 80,000 afy for both Utah and Nevada portions of Snake Valley. The RMP/EIS defines perennial yield as "generally about equal to the estimated net annual recharge". Reconnaissance Report No. 34 states that of the estimated 105,000 afy of total recharge to Snake Valley about 65,000 afy originates from precipitation in Nevada. Based on the three reports discussed above, the perennial yield of Snake Valley could

vary from >25,000 to 105,000 afy. Table 3.3-1 should be modified to more accurately show the range of perennial yield projected to be available from each hydrographic area.

The committed resources listed in Table 3.3-1 represent the total volume of permitted, certificated, and vested groundwater rights recognized by the NDWR in each hydrographic area in 1992. As a result, the committed resources are 13 years out-of-date and could vary substantially from the reported value. A footnote should be added to identify this issue. The NDWR source for this information actually specifies the month and year that the data apply to. In addition, the table needs to be footnoted stating whether these totals include or exclude supplemental duties, to help clarify what the total actually represents. It might also help for clarification to state that the 'Committed Resources' are actually 'Committed Groundwater Resources'.

Surface Water

The second paragraph on page 3.3-5 states that Lower Meadow Valley Wash and the White River are tributaries to the Virgin River. Historically, the Lower Meadow Valley Wash and the White River were tributaries to the Virgin River. Today, the Lower Meadow Valley Wash and White River flow into the Muddy River and then into the Colorado River by way of Lake Mead. Please correct the language on page 3.3-5.

The last paragraph on page 3.3-5 describes trends towards transfers of water from agricultural areas to municipal uses in Nevada. It should be noted that transfers of water from agricultural areas to municipal uses are not unique to Nevada and is occurring throughout the western part of the country.

Table 3.3-2 is not an exhaustive list of streams within specific hydrographic areas. For example, Kalamazoo Creek in hydrographic area 184 could be classified as a Class A Water. In addition, some of the assignments seem debatable. For instance, Duck Creek in hydrographic area 179 and Hendry's Creek in hydrographic area 195 have numerous diversions on them that imply they have been affected by industrial or agricultural activities. A better explanation of the data sources used and conclusions made for this table is needed.

As noted above, the NDWR usage is "hydrographic area" not "hydrographic basin". It is suggested that the title of the third column be changed to this usage.

Trends

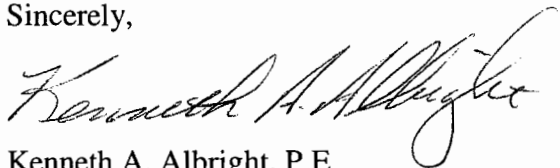
The discussion in the first paragraph on page 3.3-8 focuses on Authority projects, but neglects to mention the many other groundwater development projects proposed in the Ely District, including those by White Pine County, Lincoln County, and other private parties. The exclusive focus on Las Vegas is misleading. The discussion needs to be expanded to include other water use trends in the Ely District area. In addition, the description of the Authority's Virgin and Muddy Rivers surface water project is misplaced, in that it is solely a surface water project and

shouldn't be described under groundwater trends. Furthermore, it is not located within the Ely District, so its inclusion in the Ely RMP/EIS is confusing.

As described above, the discussion on page 3.3-8 on over-committed basins and estimated perennial yields is only applicable to the year in which the data was obtained. Most of the data cited in this plan is from the 1970s for perennial yield data and from the early 1990s for the committed resources. The discussion needs to state that the data are dated and may not clearly represent current conditions.

If you have any questions regarding these comments, please contact Holly Cheong at (702) 862-3755.

Sincerely,



Kenneth A. Albright, P.E.
Director, SNWA Resources

KAA:JM:ZM:HC:cec

Enclosures

- c: Michael Brennan, Attorney-at-Law, Holland & Hart, w/o enclosures
- Kay Brothers, Deputy General Manager, SNWA Engineering & Operations, w/o enclosures
- Richard Capp, Facility Planning Manager, Parsons, w/o enclosures
- John Entsminger, Deputy General Counsel, SNWA, w/o enclosures
- John Evans, Senior Electrical Engineer, SNWA, w/o enclosures
- Lloyd Gronning, Concept Planning Manager, Parsons, w/o enclosures
- Jennifer Hill, Attorney-at-Law, w/o enclosures
- Gordon Holmes, Design Manager – Energy Services, Parsons, w/o enclosures
- Marcus Jensen, P.E., Director, SNWA Engineering, w/o enclosures
- Jeff Johnson, Senior Hydrologist, SNWA Water Resources, w/o enclosures
- Lisa Luptowitz, Environmental Planner II, SNWA Water Resources, w/o enclosures
- Lou McNairy, Environmental Manager, Parsons, w/o enclosures
- Derek Sloop, Hydrologist II, SNWA Water Resources, w/o enclosures