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Wednesday, January 21, 2015

Press Clippings

December 10, 2014 through January 13, 2015

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2010 Poster Art Contest – Third Place, Grades K-3

MWD adds to conservation budget amid drought

Posted: Dec 10, 2014 10:34 AM PST Wednesday, December 10, 2014 1:34 PM EST*Updated: Dec 10, 2014 10:34 AM PST* Wednesday, December 10, 2014 1:34 PM EST

LOS ANGELES (AP) - The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California has added $40 million to its conservation budget and revised its water allocation plan in response to the state's historic drought.

The Los Angeles Times reports (http://lat.ms/1scZTTf) the MWD's board of directors voted Tuesday to approve the moves.

The additional funding marks the second increase in the district's rebate budget this year, boosting it from $60 million to $100 million.

The money comes out of a $232 million water management fund and goes toward rebates for residents and businesses that replace turf with drought-tolerant landscaping and install water-efficient fixtures.

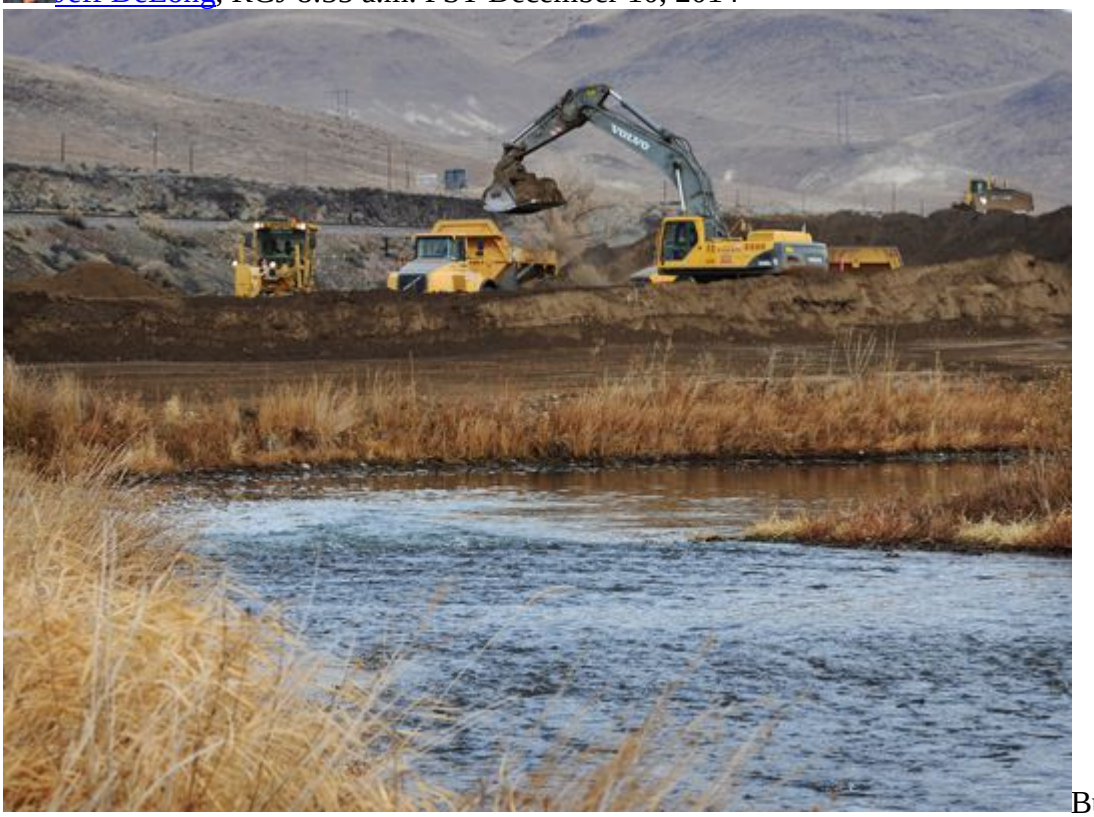
Officials say requests for turf removal since July 2014 totaled more than $100 million as of November.

The department's allocation plan defines how imported water supplies are distributed among 26 member agencies during shortages.

Information from: Los Angeles Times, http://www.latimes.com

New Truckee River project closes restoration gap

 Jeff DeLong, RGJ 8:35 a.m. PST December 10, 2014

 Buy Photo

Earth-moving machines operate during restoration work on the lower Truckee River between Mustang and McCarran ranches east of Reno on Tuesday. The Nature Conservancy is managing a mass excavation along the Truckee River as part of a 10-mile restoration project designed to revitalize the river for nature and people.(Photo: Jason Bean/RGJ)Buy Photo

Heavy equipment is again moving dirt along a stretch of the lower Truckee River as the latest effort to restore the place to a natural state takes shape.

When work is finished along the 3/4-mile-long project area, a contiguous 10-mile stretch of the Truckee between the Mustang and McCarran ranches will be restored to something closer to nature's intent.

"It's pearls on a string," Chris Sega, restoration specialist for the Nature Conservancy's Truckee River Project, said of the series of restoration projects that have occurred along the river over the course of the last decade.

Newest restoration project on the lower Truckee River seeks to correct past unintentional damage. Jeff DeLong

At a cost of about $1 million, the current project is one of the smallest, but the positive changes are cumulative, Sega and colleagues said. Counting this sixth project along the river between Lockwood on the upstream end and USA Parkway on the downstream end, some $25 million has been spent to make the river a more healthy one.

All along the river, the government and private landowners altered what was a natural, sinuous river system to a straight-shot channel. Many of the changes were made decades ago by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in a well-intentioned effort to reduce flooding in Reno-Sparks.

The result was a human-engineered alteration of the river ecosystem that proved damaging to the landscape, trees, fish and wildlife.

"They straightened the river, dredged the channel and cut out the meanders," Sega said. "It basically turned it into a ditch."

Combining modern science and a change in thinking over the best way to treat river systems, the Nature Conservancy embarked on an ambitious effort to help change things back around.

The first project, completed in 2006, rehabilitated the river at the historic McCarran Ranch where U.S. Sen. Patrick McCarran was raised. Other projects were completed at the Mustang Ranch — site of Nevada's first legalized bordello — in Lockwood, at the 102 Ranch upstream of USA Parkway and near the Tracy power plant.

Work often involved cutting new, meandering channels into the river. The latest project, like the others, is designed to allow spring runoff and floodwaters to spread naturally, nourishing the land and allowing natural vegetation to flourish.

Changes where restoration is already finished are apparent. At a place where an estimated 70 percent of native bird species had disappeared, the birds are returning. So are the fish.

"This was sadly a junk pile for many, many years," said Dave Stanley, a Reno fishing guide who has monitored changes along the restored Truckee.

These days, the lower Truckee offers a promising opportunity for anglers, with many pulling sizable rainbow, brown and cutthroat trout from the water. Restored areas offer expanded recreational opportunities for hikers and bikers as well.

"The lower river is a viable fishery now. It wasn't before," Stanley said. "The difference that they've made in the last 10 years in incredible."

BY THE NUMBERS

$1 million: Cost of current restoration project.

$25 million: Total river rehabilitation thus far on the lower Truckee.

10: Miles of contiguous restored river between McCarran and Mustang ranches.

100,000: Tons of dirt to be moved in latest project.

Source: The Nature Conservancy

Water fight takes shape in Northern Nevada

BY WILL STONE

A battle over water is brewing on the parched earth of the Black Rock Desert. An effort to transport water from Humboldt County more than 100 miles south has residents and ranchers alarmed.

A drought stricken Humboldt River near Winnemucca, Nevada.

Credit Chuck Schlarb

Chuck Giordano grows alfalfa on the outskirts of the Black Rock Desert in a place appropriately known as Desert Valley. But don't let the name fool you. When it comes to water, he's lucky.

“We have a fairly good reserve of water underneath us because our water table, even with the drought, has hardly dropped any.”

But Giordano is one of the exceptions up here. Many ranchers and farmers in Humboldt County have watched their land dry up and with it their most valuable resource.

Mel Hummel has land next door to the Giordano’s.

“Everybody else they’re having issues with their water tables dropping. They have to dig their wells deeper, drop their pumps. And someday that’s going to run out. We haven’t seen that here yet, but we might.”

This unease, you hear it in the voice of practically everyone who depends on the land out here. Still, drought is nothing new. What’s brought a group of ranchers and farmers together this day is the specter of a pipeline filled with water.

Giordano leads off the conversation at his kitchen table.

“I’m totally against water leaving the county. If you start one place selling water, it’s going to snowball in the future because water is worth more than gold.”

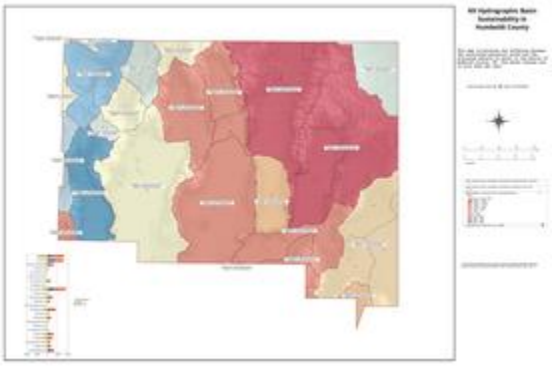
The proposal would transport about 14,000 acre-feet of groundwater from nearby more than 100 miles south—not for agriculture, but for industrial use. The water would come from one of the few basins in this region where the state hasn’t allocated all the water rights yet. But Greg Foster, who ranches just north of where the wells would go, says that doesn’t mean there’s enough water to go around.

“If it’s under-allocated, why are my wells going dry? I don’t know. The ranches are few and far between. The water is even less and further between. Why are we pumping water out of the Black Rock Desert and sending it to wherever.”

In this case, wherever is the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center, the new home of Tesla’s Gigafactory—at least that’s the proposed endpoint.

Susan Lynn is with the advocacy group, Great Basin Water Network.

“The amount of water they are requesting is 14,000 acre-feet in a basin that supposedly only has 13,000 acre-feet."



Under the proposal, groundwater from the Mud Meadow basin would be transported south via pipeline.

Credit Chuck Schlarb

And just under half of that basin—which runs along the Black Rock Desert Conservation Area—is already going to agriculture.

Lynn says this pipeline would hurt wildlife and drain water from nearby hot springs. She also believes it may not even be legal.

“We have no evidence of any contract between the developer and the water developer, so we’re not sure if there is an actual market for this water, which means it’s speculation.”

Under Nevada law, the state engineer can only grant water rights if there’s a clear beneficial use. Lynn’s group is also trying to stop Southern Nevada’s effort to transport water from eastern Nevada. But unlike that situation, an individual rancher is behind this pipeline: Rodney St. Clair, an Idaho man who owns property in Humboldt. Michael Stanka, whose engineering company is handling St. Clair’s application, spoke on his behalf.

He says transporting the water is legal because it would go to the industrial center near Storey and Lyon Counties.

“They basically understand what we are doing. When their needs grow, they’ll need water. If we can bring them water, they’re definitely interested in it.”

Except the industrial center rejects that. A spokesman says they have no agreement with St. Clair and have no need for the water because they already own enough to support decades of development.

Stanka also hopes to show through studies that more water is in the basin than its current limit. But the state engineer could always reject that and grant them only what’s available. He says this water is up for grabs and belongs to the state, not the county or the neighbors.

“I understand the thought that someone is losing their water, but it’s going to the state of Nevada and Northern Nevada to help out where it’s needed. Right now, it’s not being used, so I don’t feel we are taking it from anybody.”

Not according to Jim French, who’s a Humboldt County Commissioner.

“Any water we pump out of the basins and out of the system is going to be at the expense of somebody else.”

His county, along with Storey, are protesting the application. A hearing is set for next month. French says, like much of the state, basins in the county are over-allocated, and groundwater is not recharging fast enough.

Transporting water out of here, he says, is the last thing they need.

“Once you strip that underground resource—it’s connected, it’s not just the water under that ranch, that water is an aquifer in that entire hydrographic basin—you shut the door on everything else. We’re trying to protect the tax base and the resources for the people who were here first.”

Still, it’s not illegal to pipe water from one place in Nevada to another. And a county can't stop it, although Humboldt is pursuing a water plan that will give them more standing in future cases. State law does require a county to be compensated, though, $10 for every acre-foot per year that leaves. French believes the rate should be much higher to act as a deterrent.

Derek Kauneckis teaches political sciences and studies water policy at the University of Nevada, Reno. He says there’s a trade off in situations like this, particularly when transporting groundwater.

“There are certainly economic benefits. It [groundwater] is our only new water resource that’s available for Nevada. There’s a good case to be made for growing our industrial base, especially with new industries coming there, and especially with the impact of the Recession on the state. Underlying that, though, is this idea of traditional uses and those who have benefited form water resources in the past.”

He says the best system would reward farmers, who have current water rights, for transferring it out of their area.

Ultimately, the state engineer will decide whether this particular water stays. But those watching the water situation believe this is just the cusp. Increasingly, farms are being bought up for their water. A few years ago, one of the biggest operations, Winnemucca Farms, sold half of its assets for 30 million dollars to a New York City-based investment firm, called Water Asset Management LLC. That's made people here nervous more water could be destined for somewhere else.

Requests for comment from the firm were not returned.

Back at the Giordano's kitchen table, ranchers, like Jessie Fry, are worried about their future.

View from Chuck Giordano's farm in Humboldt County.

Credit Will Stone

"Start with one person selling water, and everybody else will think why not get right in the middle of this? And then the folks who do want to continue on are going to have a hard time."

With water dwindling statewide, the ranchers in Humboldt wont be the only ones left thirsty.

Tags:
Drought
water
Nevada
Humboldt County

Editorial: Tesla pipeline idea – be careful with water

The Opinion of the Reno Gazette-Journal Editorial Board 10:33 a.m. PST December 15, 2014

The Truckee Meadows Water Reclamation Facility is seen in an aerial view. It is nearing capacity for the amount of nitrogen from treated wastewater it is allowed to put into the Truckee River.(Photo: Courtesy of RTC via city of Sparks)

Reno-Sparks is poised for a Tesla-influenced population boom that will test its resources.

Projections show the area is capable of handling the water needs of all these new people, but there are concerns over what happens to the water after it is used.

Treated sewer water put back into the Truckee River is only allowed to contain so much "stuff." More people means more stuff. Reno-Sparks is already near its limit of stuff. Something must be done, and it will be expensive.

Before big decisions are made, public discussions must be had to decide how much treated water — effluent — this high desert area is willing to give up control over.

Short-term ideas are being considered: pouring effluent into the ground somewhere — likely near Spanish Springs — to allow it to return to nature, or putting it in winter storage reservoirs for use during high-demand warm months.

Winter storage is helpful because of a quirk of effluent that leads to more in colder weather. Demand drops for effluent in the winter because its main uses are for agricultural fields and landscaping such as in parks and golf courses. And the microbes used to break down the stuff in the effluent don't like the cold weather so they can't process as much.

Two main plans are being floated to deal with the effluent problem in the long-term.

•One involves building a $35 million pipeline to send the effluent water to the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center, where Tesla will be located, for industrial processes that don't require drinkable water. The money would likely come largely from grants available for economic development. The pipeline solves the problem because the stuff-filled effluent would not be put into the Truckee River and would not count against the total amount of stuff allowed for Reno-Sparks.

•The other main option involves installing $40 million worth of nitrogen treatment technology at the Truckee Meadows Water Reclamation Facility. The money would come from developers building new housing projects who would buy into their portion of the new technology — and from ratepayers in Reno-Sparks. This technology solves the problem by breaking down more of the nitrogen stuff so the effluent returned to the river contains less.

The more likely of the two plans seems to be the pipeline out to Tesla and the surrounding industrial park in Storey County. This is, in part, because Reno-Sparks residents and businesses would pay less to create a long-term solution; the industrial park wants more effluent and this would be a less expensive way to get it; and Tesla loves the idea of using reclaimed water as part of its sustainable, green image.

One could be forgiven for thinking: Hey, if $35 million is available for effluent pipes to spur economic development, why send the water to another county? Instead, why not have Reno-Sparks build effluent pipes — also called purple pipes because of their color — to attract companies that would locate here if they were available and to help existing businesses?

Companies with massive data servers (think Apple) as well as many manufacturers can use such water. In fact, they prefer to because it is much cheaper than regular, drinkable water.

Currently, Reno and Sparks are allowed to sell effluent to businesses but there are almost no takers because the businesses have to pay to run the pipes to their locations, something that is cost prohibitive. But if grant money became available …

Unfortunately, reality stomps on this idea.

Costs would be expected to run much higher — maybe five times higher — to create a similar amount of effluent pipeline in urban areas. That is because roads would have to be torn up,

power and gas lines would need to be routed around, expensive right of ways may need to be acquired, etc.

The idea, though, is a good one and it brings up a line of discussion that needs to be had before entering negotiations to pipe the effluent out of Washoe County.

The temptation will be to give Tesla whatever it wants. It, or the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center, may request access to the maximum amount of effluent that can be given.

But what if another player wants to locate here if it can get access to large amounts of effluent, too? Or what if there are other projects or developments not yet dreamed of that could use it?

Reno-Sparks will not be able to exploit these future opportunities to their fullest if it commits to giving away too much of its effluent now.

The boards and commissions that ultimately will have to sign off on any deal must protect this valuable resource and not allow Reno-Sparks to cede too much control over it.

Water board to discuss timing of flat-rate switchover

Jeff DeLong, RGJ 3:59 p.m. PST December 15, 2014

Discussion by directors of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority regarding the conversion of all flat-rate water customers to metered service is scheduled Wednesday.(Photo: Tim Dunn/RGJ file)

Timing of the proposed switchover of the last flat-rate water customers across the Reno-Sparks area to metered service is set to be discussed Wednesday by directors of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority.

After directors in September asked utility staff to return with a report regarding how the long-discussed goal of “flipping the switch” to require metered service for all might occur, they will be presented with two potential timelines.

One would be fairly aggressive, with a decision made in March after a set of public meetings and the switchover to metered service taking effect June 1 with the onset of next summer. The other would take longer, with meetings occurring over the summer and a decision made in September.

Required metered service would then take effect in January 2016 and after the end of the next summer irrigation season.

The water authority, established in 2001 and overseen by the cities of Reno and Sparks and Washoe County, now serves about 95,000 homes and businesses across the Truckee Meadows. Of those, only 5,556 homes, condominiums and multifamily units are still billed at a flat rate and could be quickly converted to metered billing.

Eventual conversion to metered water service was a key requirement of the 1990 Truckee River Negotiated Settlement, which provides for a long-term water supply for the region. It is also an important component of the Truckee River Operating Agreement, designed to do the same thing in the future.

Discussions over requiring a full conversion have occurred on and off over the years and during that time the number of flat-rate customers has diminished steadily, dropping by nearly 84 percent. A series of six rate adjustments adopted since 2003 was designed to encourage conversion, with the amount paid by flat-rate customers increasing from $49.53 per month to current levels of $100.63. Average bills for metered customers went from $31.53 to $42.76 over the same period.

But flat-rate residential customers use a lot more water — about double — averaging 282,000 gallons per year compared to the 124,000 used by metered customers, according to utility officials.

That fact, when viewed in the context of a drought now three years in duration, has renewed discussion of the need to end flat-rate water service.

“The board has considered this several times before. The difference this time is the drought,” said Mark Foree, general manager of the water authority. “It really makes sense from a standpoint of water conservation to do this now.”

One advantage of a more aggressive schedule for conversion would be an immediate savings next summer – something that could prove particularly important should the drought extend into a fourth year. An argument in favor of a longer period is it would give people more time to make such changes as the removal of water-thirsty turf.

“This is a policy decision of the board,” Foree said.

The drought has already forced some significant steps by the utility. Last summer and for the first time in 20 years, the water provider was forced to tap backup drought supplies stored in upstream reservoirs to meet demand. It also asked customers to reduce outdoor water consumption, the first time that’s been necessary for two decades.

If you go

What: Truckee Meadows Water Authority.

When: 10 a.m. Wednesday.

Where: Sparks Council Chambers, 745 4th St., Sparks

Rain could spell trouble for Calif. Conservation Efforts

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) - After California's driest three years on record, there have been few sounds as disturbing to water conservationists as the whisk-whisk-whisk of automatic lawn sprinklers kicking on directly behind TV reporters covering some of the state's first heavy downpours in years.

Recent storms eased the drought somewhat, but there's a long way to go. And state officials are worried that the rain will give people an excuse to abandon the already inconsistent conservation efforts adopted to deal with the dry spell.

When Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency in January, he asked people to cut water use by 20 percent. Instead, many Californians' water use actually went up for a while. Dozens of communities called for mandatory water cuts but lacked the means to enforce them. So lawn watering, golf course maintenance and curbside car washes went on without interruption.

State officials and weather experts say it's too early to know if the storms are the beginning of the end of the drought. They pledge to keep promoting conservation.

"A deluge like this makes us feel, 'Oh, my God, it must be over,'" said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the state Water Resources Control Board, which instituted monthly water-use reporting this year to bring home to Californians how much water they were using.

But "we are in a really deep hole ... and we have to act like we are in the drought of our lives." She said officials will "keep working on it even after the drought because there's going to be another one around the bend."

The water board found last month that some well-off Southern California communities were still using more than 500 gallons per person a day - 10 times the amount used by some poorer cities. Marcus and others pledged to step up education efforts.

Climatologist Bill Patzert, a drought expert at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, rose at 3 a.m. last week to bask in the sound of rain from the first big storm to roll through Southern California in a long time. By dawn, he was glowering at television reports showing water-wasting automatic sprinklers whirring in the rain behind at the scene of mudslides and floods.

"Tell them to turn off their damn sprinklers for a week. Tell them I said so," Patzert said. "We're still in a drought."

The biggest storm so far this season brought up to 5 inches of rain last Thursday to Southern California, 8 inches in Northern California and 6 feet of snow in the higher Sierras. Sierra snowpack surged, from just 24 percent of average at the start of December to 48 percent of normal on Tuesday, according to the Department of Water Resources.

The snow in the Sierras is all-important, providing the water supply for more than half of California, said Roger Bales, an expert in hydrology at the University of California-Merced.

He is one of many experts trying to spread the message that one or two rains don't end a drought. The key part of the rainy season - January, February and March - still lies ahead, Bales said.

"It's too early in the season to predict we're going to have a wet, average, or dry year. Anything could happen," he said.

This past summer, an estimated $2.2 billion in annual economic losses from lack of rain helped persuade state lawmakers to begin ending unregulated pumping of vital underground aquifers. California was one of the last states in the county that still allowed it. In the fall, voters approved $7.5 billion for water conservation and storage.

But individuals did not show as much commitment. Residents managed peak cuts of 11.6 percent in water use over the summer, but backslid to 6.7 percent in the fall.

California would need 11 trillion gallons of water to replenish its natural water stores, according to a projection this week from scientists using satellite data to analyze snowpack and groundwater.

"It takes years to get into a drought of this severity, and it will likely take many more big storms, and years, to crawl out of it," Jay Famiglietti, another researcher at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, said in a statement.

Even so, Fresno County farmer Paul Betancourt was feeling pretty good as he drove this week to his recently planted winter wheat fields. With just 3.3 inches of rain falling on his crop last year, Betancourt was forced to spend $40,000 expanding wells for his 756 acres. Using groundwater to water his fields left white rings of salt in the soil.

With 2.7 inches falling already this winter, that salt is starting to wash away.

"Big improvement on last year," Betancourt said. "Driving, it just looks much fresher. We had to order rain suits."

Utility to require water meter conversion come June

Jeff DeLong, RGJ 2:36 p.m. PST December 17, 2014

Directors of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority agreed Wednesday to pursue an aggressive scheduled to convert all customers to metered water service.(Photo: RGJ file)

Insisting the time to do so is overdue, directors of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority decided Wednesday to “flip the switch” and require all flat-rate water customers to be billed through meters as soon as possible.

Come June, virtually all of the remaining 5,556 homes, condominium and multifamily units still billed at a flat rate, paying the same amount regardless of the amount of water used, will be billed through meters, which charge based on the actual amount of water consumption. Conversion to meters would save an estimated 141 acre-feet of water, or nearly 46 million gallons, annually.

During a time of protracted drought and after years of delayed action, doing so now simply makes sense, a majority of the utility board agreed.

“We need to do it today and get going with it,” said Sparks Mayor Geno Martini, chairman of the water board. “To me, it’s time. It’s way past time.”

A fast-tracked timeline for conversion was approved by a vote of 4-2, with Reno City Council members Neoma Jardon and Jenny Brekhus voting no. They favored a conversion timing that would kick in Jan. 1, 2016, allowing remaining flat-rate customers — many of them elderly — more time to adjust. A formal policy vote on the issue is scheduled for March.

The need to bill entirely through meters has been discussed for years and is a cornerstone of long-term water management strategies for the Reno-Sparks area. The number of flat-rate customers has dropped steadily over the years — from nearly 32,000 in 2003, almost equal to the number of metered customers at the time — to only a fraction of that.

Renewed discussion of the need to convert all remaining flat-rate customers to meters comes during a third year of a drought that has lowered lakes and reservoirs, diminished flows of the Truckee River and forced the use of backup drought supplies for the first time in 20 years. Residential flat-rate customers typically use twice as much water as those on meters, mostly for outdoor irrigation.

Resistance by some to the idea continues. Appearing before the panel, Reno City Councilwoman Naomi Duerr urged a delay in the decision or at least putting off the conversion deadline until January 2016. She said many remaining flat-rate customers live in her ward and that she has heard from some 20 residents concerned over the idea.

Longtime Reno resident Judson Pierce, a flat-rate customer, warned that owners of some larger lots now billed like him might allow trees and landscaping to die after the change in billing status, creating blight.

“We might end up with a lot of dead trees and a lot of dead corner lots,” said Pierce, 82. “I’m just afraid if this goes through it might be ugly.”

While an estimated 16 percent of single-family homeowners now billed at a flat rate might see water bills rise with meters, the vast majority would likely pay less, utility officials said.

Reno resident Janet Phillips urged the water panel to take an action she called years overdue.

“All this talk about suddenly, too soon, too quick — I’m not very sympathetic,” Phillips said. “I would ask you to please wrap this up.”

The conversion to meters is needed to be fair to all of the utility’s customers and to save precious water during a time of drought, said Washoe County Commissioner Vaughn Hartung.

“We live in a desert,” Hartung said. “I think it’s the right thing to do.”

Water rate hike avoided

Directors of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority voted Wednesday to cancel a proposed rate increase that had been scheduled to take effect in February. Improved financial conditions make the rate hike – the last in a trio of rate adjustments approved by the board in January 2012 – unnecessary, utility officials said. The increase would have added about $1.40 per month to average water bills. No new rate hikes by the authority, which will soon also serve some 24,000 currently provided water by Washoe County, in the near future, officials said.

Reno-Area Agency To End Unmetered Water Use

- Ky Plaskon

Thursday, December 18, 2014 | Sacramento, CA | Permalink

The Board of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority has voted to move forward with metered service for all customers. About 4,000 customers now pay flat rates. They use more than twice as water as customers on metered service. John Erwin, the Authority's Director of Natural Resources and Planning says, once switched to metered service those flat-rate customers are expected to save 45 million gallons a year.

"And just having that information of what you use, you can start to think about, 'Can I be using my water more efficiently. Can I use it better.' And when you see that information all of a sudden, 'Oh my gosh!"

Water Authority staff will hold public meetings over the next 6 months with a final board vote on the conversion expected in May.

Lake Mead “Samaritan” bill...

Posted December 20, 2014 - 9:58am**Updated** December 20, 2014 - 4:29pm

Tesla battery factory near Reno will gulp water

Tesla battery factory near Reno will gulp water

Tesla Motors CEO Elon Musk speaks at a press conference at the Capitol in Carson City, Nev., on Thursday, Sept. 4, 2014. (AP Photo/Cathleen Allison)

Tesla battery factory near Reno will gulp water

From left, Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval, Steve Hill, executive director of the Governor's office of economic development, and Telsa Motors CEO Elon Musk answer questions following a news conference at the Capitol, in Carson City, Nev., on Thursday, Sept. 4, 2014. Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval announced Thursday that Tesla Motors will build a massive battery factory in the state as long as legislators approve tax breaks and other incentives worth up to $1.3 billion over 20 years. (AP Photo/Cathleen Allison)

image

By SANDRA CHEREB
SPECIAL TO THE LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

RENO — The massive Tesla battery factory being built in Northern Nevada will be a thirsty resident, with some preliminary estimates saying it will require the equivalent of nearly half of the groundwater rights allocated to its Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center neighborhood.

The project, the cherry atop Gov. Brian Sandoval's economic development agenda to date, promises high-paying jobs and a diversification from a long-sagging gambling economy to one powered by high-tech manufacturing and technology.

But the $5 billion, 5 million-square-foot facility going up just down the road from Reno-Sparks in Storey County exemplifies the challenges of balancing economic growth with the availability of natural resources needed to sustain it.

State and local economic development officials say through smart use of technology and recycling the most precious resource — water — the region is up to the task.

Skeptics, while not opposed to the huge project per se, question whether there's as much water as projected in the basin along the Truckee River to meet demands without harming the river and downstream users.

After months of negotiations and tense competition among five states, Tesla Motors, headed by billionaire Elon Musk, chose Northern Nevada as the site of the huge battery factory, a joint project with Panasonic Corp. of Japan. The plant, expected to employ upward of 6,000, will make lithium-ion batteries on a large scale, something Tesla says is needed to reduce the cost of its electric cars and make them more affordable and attractive to the auto-buying public.

Nevada awarded $1.3 billion in tax incentives to lure Tesla to the Silver State.

WATER: KEY TALKING POINT

Tesla has not said how much water the huge plant will require, saying through a spokeswoman that it is "too early to say." But Steve Hill, director of the Governor's Office of Economic Development and Nevada's point man on the Tesla deal, concedes water availability was an integral factor during talks.

"Water was a pretty significant part of the conversation," Hill said. "They certainly wanted to make sure that water was not going to be a problem for them."

The 165-square-mile Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center, the largest in North America, offers a half-acre foot of water for every acre a tenant develops, Hill said. Tesla, which is developing 1,000 acres, received 500 acre-feet of water as part of that provision.

"That's a starting point," Hill said. "A groundwater allocation that Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center has already."

But it's not nearly enough for operations.

"The amount has not absolutely been determined, but it will probably be in the 2,000 to 2,500 acre-foot range by the time the facility reaches maturity. They're going to need plus or minus another 2,000 acre-feet in order to operate," Hill said, adding that the volume has been reduced as project engineers reconfigure design to maximize efficiency.

"Tesla certainly is very focused on the environment in general," Hill said. "So they have worked really hard to bring down the amount of water that they would need, both from a business practice standpoint and in keeping in line with the values of the company."

For comparison, the MGM Grand on the Strip used 397 million gallons of water, or 1,218 acre-feet in 2013, according to the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre of land 12 inches deep, or about 326,000 gallons. One acre-foot of water is enough to supply two average Las Vegas Valley households for a little more than one year.

The industrial center has 5,295 acre-feet of groundwater rights in the basin, according to the state engineer's office. It also has rights to 4,480 acre-feet of recycled sewer water on the property and 220 acre-feet of surface rights from the Truckee River.

WATER CONCERNS DISMISSED

Lance Gilman, a Storey County commissioner and principal in the industrial center, which has about 170 tenants, dismissed water concerns. He said the industrial park has ample supplies, its own treatment plant and a sophisticated recycling system that greatly reduces demand for groundwater.

"The treated water … we pipe that up to a reservoir that's 100 acres in size," Gilman said. "We can hold 1,000 acre-feet of water in storage within that lake. We recycle everything we use out there."

Well records show the industrial park pumped 900 acre-feet of water in 2012, and 500 acre-feet the following year, the state engineer's office said. No water was pumped from the Truckee River.

Gilman said a report by the U.S. Geological Survey showed the location sits atop an underground aquifer containing tens of thousands of acre-feet of water, suggesting more groundwater could be had if necessary.

But some argue that the mere presence of water does not alone make that water ripe for siphoning. The important thing, they say, isn't the size of the aquifer but perennial yield, defined as the maximum amount of groundwater that can be taken each year over the long term for beneficial use without depleting the reservoir.

"One would question whether that basin can actually safely provide what they think they can," said Tom Myers, a hydrologist and consultant for Great Basin Water Network.

He also discounted Gilman's assertion that more groundwater was there for the taking.

"We have to allow groundwater mining to get to that, and that is something that Nevada, to its credit, does not allow," Myers said.

PERENNIAL YIELD QUESTION

Determining perennial yield is a complicated calculation, often based on best-guess estimates of annual recharge through precipitation and natural discharge of groundwater that makes its way into streams, springs and plants.

That point was acknowledged by Nevada's state water engineer, Jason King, in a 2013 ruling that involved 18 water right applications in the watershed around the industrial site known as the Tracy Segment Hydrographic Basin. King noted that estimates from experts of mean recharge from precipitation varied widely, from 2,000 to 22,000 acre-feet annually. He pronounced the basin's perennial yield from groundwater recharge at 11,500 acre-feet annually.

Myers remains skeptical, saying the state engineer's amount of available water "may be overestimated because it doesn't account for groundwater that is supposed to end up in the Truckee River."

Applications addressed in King's ruling requested a combined allocation of 15,420 acre-feet annually.

Of those, 12,000 acre-feet were sought by the industrial center but only 2,740 acre-feet were approved. In denying three other requests for a combined 3,200 acre-feet, King concluded that given existing groundwater rights of about 8,500 acre-feet, "there is insufficient water to satisfy these applications."

His ruling also referenced testimony during applications hearings that water demand at Tahoe-Reno Industrial Park at build-out could range from 11,900 acre-feet to 45,000 acre-feet, depending on the types of companies that move there.

Gilman said the center will work with its current allocation of water.

"And then," Gilman said, "as more science is developed, and we're working on it constantly, there'll be more water identified."

"There's not a water shortage," he reiterated, adding the center pumped millions of gallons a day to handle Tesla's grading project "and didn't stress the system at all."

"As we need more water, we'll reach out," he said.

OTHER WATER SOURCES

But the industrial center is not interested in water from the Black Rock Desert, Gilman and Storey County Manager Pat Whitten said after an Idaho businessman with farming operations in Nevada's Humboldt County filed two applications proposing to pump water from the desert 100 miles south to the industrial site.

The applications by Rodney St. Clair filed in October seek 14,000 acre-feet from the Double Hot Springs and Casey Hot Springs areas located on private land within the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area.

Whitten said the county was not contacted beforehand about the proposal and the Storey County Commission voted unanimously to protest the applications. Gilman added it doesn't make sense financially.

"The economics don't pencil out," Gilman said. "By the time you pump the water to get it to our market, it's no longer attractive from a financial aspect."

A more appealing alternative to bolster water for the industrial park is the Truckee Meadows Water Reclamation Facility, about 20 miles west in neighboring Washoe County.

The treatment plant is nearing capacity and struggling to meet environmental standards for nitrogen discharges into the Truckee River. The cost of building a pipeline to transfer treated effluent to the industrial park has been estimated at $35 million.

“What we plan to do is use that recycled water as the additional water for the Tesla manufacturing operation,” Hill said. “There’s more than enough excess water coming out of the treatment plant than Tesla would need.”

Such an arrangement, Hill said, provides water for Tesla, cleans up the river and helps the treatment facility in its discharge distribution efforts. He called it a “win-win” for everybody.

In the driest state in the nation, finding water for industrial use is a continuing challenge.

“It certainly comes up in a number of projects that we’re looking at,” Hill said. “So far we have not had a situation where a solution could not be found. And certainly companies are becoming more and more attuned to the fact that they need to be as efficient as they can with water.

“We have to make sure those projects fit for Nevada and Nevada fits for those projects.”

From left, Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval, Steve Hill, executive director of the Governor's office of economic development, and Telsa Motors CEO Elon Musk answer questions following a news conference at the Capitol, in Carson City, Nev., on Thursday, Sept. 4, 2014. Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval announced Thursday that Tesla Motors will build a massive battery factory in the state as long as legislators approve tax breaks and other incentives worth up to $1.3 billion over 20 years. (AP Photo/Cathleen Allison)

image

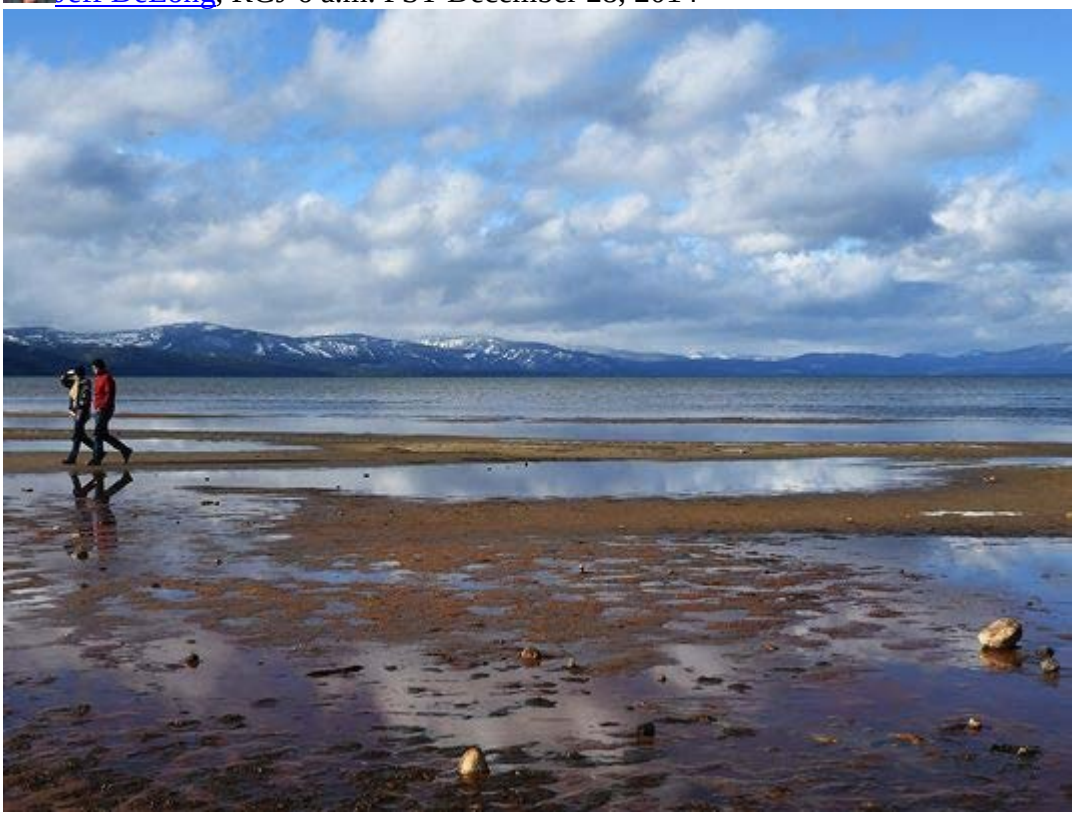
By SANDRA CHEREB
SPECIAL TO THE LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

RENO — The massive Tesla battery factory being built in Northern Nevada will be a thirsty resident, with some preliminary estimates saying it will require the equivalent of nearly half of the groundwater rights allocated to its Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center neighborhood.

The project, the cherry atop Gov. Brian Sandoval's economic development agenda to date, promises high-paying jobs and a diversification from a long-sagging gambling economy to one powered by high-tech manufacturing and technology.

Nevada — the driest state — has no statewide water plan

 Jeff DeLong, RGJ 6 a.m. PST December 28, 2014



Angel Cooper, left, and Sat Khalsa, visiting from Monterey, Calif., walk along the Lake Tahoe shoreline at Thomas F. Regan Memorial City Beach at South Lake Tahoe on Dec. 16, 2014.(Photo: Jason Bean/RGJ)

Nevada is suffering from a debilitating drought, experiencing the impacts of a warming climate and, some say, is deficient when it comes to long-term water planning for the state as a whole.

Debate is mounting over the need to begin development of a comprehensive water plan taking into account available water supplies, drought, climate projections and development that will tap limited water resources across the nation's most arid state.

Planners and elected officials have water resource plans in place across the state – in Reno-Sparks, Las Vegas, the Carson River Basin and elsewhere. But a number of experts are now

pushing for a more holistic approach addressing water supply issues statewide, efforts similar to ones taken by neighbors of the Silver State including Utah, Arizona and California.

RGJ
DROUGHT: RGJ stories lead to surge in 'water audits'

RGJ
Hungry and wild: Drought forcing bears into Reno

"Our suggestion is rather than a silo approach we need a much broader approach," said Steve Bradhurst, executive director of the eight-county Central Nevada Regional Water Authority, which encompasses 65 percent of Nevada's land mass.

The Colorado River Basin, which provides Las Vegas with its water, has experienced the driest 14 years in 100 years of record and faces a worst-case shortfall of 8 million acre-feet of water per year by 2060, according to a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation study cited by the authority. Plans by the Southern Nevada Water Authority to pump billions of gallons of groundwater from beneath remote valleys along the Nevada-Utah line and pipe it to the desert metropolitan area continue to generate impassioned controversy and are now in the courts.

Western Nevada is now in a third year of a drought that has lowered rivers, lakes and reservoirs and forced the Reno-Sparks area to tap backup drought supplies for the first time in 20 years. The "bulls eye" for the current drought lies about 100 miles to the east, where a dried-up lower Humboldt River this year cut off access to all irrigation water to farmers in that important agricultural area.

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It all adds up to an issue of increasing concern, Bradhurst and others insist.

"Things don't look good down the road. If we continue on the path that we are going, we're going to have a problem," Bradhurst said. "What we need to do is have a discussion about where we are going in this state with regard to water supplies."

Legislation designed to initiate such a process passed the Assembly in 2013 but stalled in the Senate. A bill draft request would renew the process for the 2015 Legislature as requested in August by Legislative Committee on Public Lands. As currently proposed, the effort

would involve creation of a statewide committee consisting of all water authorities, the Colorado River Commission of Nevada and the state Division of Water Resources.

The group would be tasked with studying "current and future water supply and allocation levels in Nevada, including the state's capabilities and need to measure annual pumpage amounts, water resource budgets and annual groundwater levels."

The end result, supporters say, should provide sufficient data to "create a long-term statewide water plan and water supply program."

 Buy Photo

The Lake Tahoe shoreline is seen at Thomas F. Regan Memorial City Beach at South Lake Tahoe on Dec. 16, 2014.(Photo: Jason Bean/RGJ)

Water in other states

On Dec. 12 during a Reno meeting hosted by the Central Nevada Regional Water Authority and the State Land Use Planning Advisory Council, water experts from Utah, Arizona and California discussed broad-based water plans enacted or currently being prepared for their states. The presentation was one key recommendation made by the central Nevada authority last April in a position paper warning that "all of Nevada is facing a water supply crisis."

Conditions in each state are, of course, different. But there are similarities as well. Each state is trying to serve significant growth with limited water supplies. Utah is the nation's second driest state behind Nevada. Like Nevada, California is now in its third year of withering drought. In Arizona, water is always a worry.

"It's what we do in the desert. We worry about water. It's in our DNA," said Kathleen Ferris, executive director of the Arizona Municipal Water Users Association. Ferris outlined decades of effort to meld growth and water supply issues in Arizona, including the landmark passage of a groundwater management act in 1980 she said has "really shaped Arizona's water management policies in general."

Three years of drought have dropped the Truckee River to the lowest it has been this te of year in 20 years. In a few weeks, it will get worse. Jeff DeLong/RGJ

Provisions of that act call for, among other things, preparation of management plans to reduce water withdrawals and identification of assured 100-year water supplies in advance of building new subdivisions.

In Utah, where the population of 2.9 million is expected to nearly double to 5.4 million by 2050, there is a broad-based effort newly underway to identify water needs and address related issues, said Alan Matheson, Utah state planning coordinator and senior environmental adviser to Gov. Gary Herbert.

Utah is in the midst of developing an ambitious strategy for a 50-year water plan for the state, Maetheson said. Long-term goals include a 25 percent reduction of per capita water use by 2025. Organizers hope to involve 50,000 Utah residents in what is characterized as a "bottom-up" decision-making process.

The task ahead is far from easy. It is estimated some $33 billion will be needed to maintain existing water systems and build needed new ones. Difficult questions are being asked. Among them – how much water should be devoted to Utah's environment? Should water be transferred from agriculture for use in cities and towns? Should water supplies be increased with large, new water storage and transmission projects?

"The future isn't a place we arrive at. The future is a place we create," Matheson said. "The future of Utah is very much tied to the future of water."

Nevada plan needed?

More than 100 people – including state and local officials, environmentalists and concerned citizens – attended the Dec. 12 meeting and some said it may be time to pay more attention to creating a future for Nevada when it comes to water as well.

Among them is Naomi Duerr, a newly elected Reno City Council member who served as Nevada's state water planner from 1993 to 2000.

"It seems to varying degrees they have their act together," Duerr said of the three neighboring states and their evolving water strategies. "It does beg the question where are we in Nevada and where are we going?"

Pursuing a broad state water plan for Nevada would be another significant task for a state already facing significant funding shortfalls and any decision to do so would be made by a Legislature that will already be weighing difficult issues, Duerr said.

"Do they have an appetite to do that?" she asks. "It's all a matter of priorities for the state."

RGJ

Western drought disrupts Nevada duck migration

RGJ

Flat-rate water use to be phased out

Vaughn Hartung, a Washoe County commissioner who serves on the board of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority – the primary water provider for Reno-Sparks – agrees more discussions on the overall issue of water supplies, drought and climate change are warranted.

"I'm not saying we've been doing it wrong all these years. I'm just saying we need to look at what we're doing," Hartung said. He has a little trouble envisioning how a statewide plan might come together given the wide differences in needs and requirements between Nevada's north and south, east and west.

"That 30,000-foot look is very important but I'm more of a proponent of a regional look," Hartung said. Such an effort locally, he said, might involve the northern Nevada counties of Washoe, Carson City, Douglas, Lyon, Storey, Pershing and Humboldt.

"What we do affects other counties and what they do affects us. We need to be cognizant of that," Hartung said.

Hartung said that at this point, he's comfortable with the long-term water supply plan for prepared by the Truckee Meadows Water Authority. That plan identifies adequate water supplies to weather a drought nine years in duration, with a couple of wet years thrown in during the course of that span.

That's not to say relatively quick-term changes are not in order, Hartung said. Among some already under discussion by the water authority in response to the current drought are removal of requirements for installation of water-thirsty turf along parkways and in common areas in the Reno area.

Bob Fulkerson of the Progressive Leadership Alliance said the experts from Utah, Arizona and California offered some inspiring ideas about water planning from which Nevada could learn. A focused discussion on the state's water issues is overdue, Fulkerson said.

"Right now we're in the middle of a drought that we have no idea how long will last and there's also that thing no one wants to talk about and that's climate change," Fulkerson said.

Too frequently in the past, Fulkerson said, decisions about water and growth have been made by politicians beholden to campaign contributors, often developers. A change in that approach is needed, he said.

"We need a stakeholder-based, science-based non-political approach to water planning," Fulkerson said. "We should look ahead and tell the truth and not base it on politics. Now it is based on politics and that's not the way to do water planning."

 Buy Photo

Joan Young, left, and Nancy Marez walk their dogs along the Lake Tahoe shoreline at Thomas F. Regan Memorial City Beach at South Lake Tahoe on Dec. 16, 2014.(Photo: Jason Bean/RGJ)

A neighbor's water plans

Utah

• Population to go from 2.9 million to 5.4 million in 2050.

• 50-year water supply sought.

• 25 percent reduction in per capital water use sought by 2025.

• $33 billion needed for water by 2060.

'In Utah, we don't believe in sitting back and seeing where growth will take us. We seek to be visionary and to actively secure our future. Together, we will develop a voluntary, locally implemented, market-driven vision to help keep Utah beautiful, prosperous, healthy and neighborly for current residents and future generations.'

–Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, Oct. 29, 2013

Historic Reno bridge faces beginning of end

Updated 7:08 pm, Sunday, December 28, 2014

RENO, Nev. (AP) — It will soon be the beginning of the end for a historic bridge spanning the Truckee River in downtown Reno.

Crews in January are expected to begin removing utility lines that run through the Virginia Street Bridge, paving the way for the aging structure's demolition and construction of a new bridge.

The bridge, built in 1905, was made famous by divorcees who tossed rings from it into the Truckee when Reno was the world's divorce capital from roughly 1910 to 1970.

Reno still awaits issuance of a federal permit needed to enter the river and begin major demolition of the bridge, but utility work can proceed in the meantime, said Kerri Lanza, an engineering manager for the city.

Plans call for utility lines to be placed on temporary poles to span the Truckee.

"This is going to help us a great deal in order to hit the road running," Lanza told the Reno Gazette-Journal (http://on.rgj.com/1rtTOBj).

Major construction is likely to begin next June, with the structure replaced sometime in 2016.

The concrete, double-arched bridge needs to be replaced not only because of its age, officials said, but because it acts as a bottleneck during floods and causes water to pour onto downtown streets.

The construction of a new "bowstring truss" bridge that allows easier passage of debris-laden floodwaters is a major component of the Truckee River Flood project.

"It's critical to do this," said Jay Aldean, flood project director. "The Virginia Street Bridge is crumbling as we speak. It's probably one of the worst bridges in the country."

Construction bids are scheduled to be awarded by the Reno City Council in March, and major demolition is expected to begin in June.

Removal of the existing bridge and construction of the new one could take up to 18 months to complete, but strong incentives are in place to finish the job early, city officials said

California's first snow survey set for Tuesday

Posted: Dec 30, 2014 3:15 AM PST Tuesday, December 30, 2014 6:15 AM EST*Updated: Dec 30, 2014 3:15 AM PST* Tuesday, December 30, 2014 6:15 AM EST

ECHO SUMMIT, Calif. (AP) - The state Department of Water Resources is slated to do the winter's first manual measurement of the snowpack in the Sierra Nevada.

Abundant snowfall in the mountains would be an important part of ending one of the worst droughts in more than a century of record keeping.

State officials say California's snowpack supplies about a third of the water needed by the state's residents, agriculture and industry as it melts in the late spring and summer.

After three straight years of below-average snow and rainfall, surface and groundwater reservoirs are depleted. That isn't likely to change unless rain and snow this year are above historical averages. Though December was wet, the storms were warmer than needed to generate greater-than-normal snowfall in the Sierra Nevada.

Sierra snowpack remains below normal for December

Jeff DeLong, RGJ 6:02 a.m. PST December 30, 2014

Beau Uriona of the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service measures the mountain snowpack in February 2014. While conditions have improved somewhat from a year ago, the Sierra snowpack remains below normal.(Photo: Tim Dunn/ RGJ file)

December snowfall showed some improvement over a year ago but the Sierra snowpack so vital to the region's water supplies remains below normal, a worrying scenario for a region struggling to emerge from three years of drought.

On Monday, the Truckee River Basin's snowpack was 67 percent of normal for the date compared to only 23 percent on Dec. 29, 2013. The Lake Tahoe Basin's snowpack was 44 percent compared to 35 percent a year ago, according to automated measurements by the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service.

After the three-year drought basically robbed the Sierra of an entire year's worth of winter precipitation, there's a big hole from which the region must emerge, with Lake Tahoe – the area's largest reservoir – still nearly a half-foot below its natural rim.

An “inside slider” storm from the north was forecast to bring snow to Reno-Tahoe overnight and into Tuesday morning, but if the region is to emerge from drought a lot more storms – and much bigger ones – will be needed during the coming winter months of January, February and March, experts said.

“We’re doing much, much better this year than last but we really still need some of those big storms to come through,” said Jeff Anderson, hydrologist and snow surveyor for the Reno office of the conservation service.

While many had high hopes for a powerful Pacific storm that hit the area Dec. 11, it “really kind of fizzled east of the (Sierra) crest,” Anderson said. That storm, a real gully-washer for Northern California, produced only limited snow at the Sierra’s highest elevations. Smaller storms since really proved more effective in boosting snowpack levels in many areas.

According to latest estimates, if the rest of the winter produces average precipitation, runoff of the Truckee River at Farad, Calif., would be about 69 percent of normal.

Many are anxiously watching the winter’s performance, including water providers. The Truckee Meadows Water Authority, serving 95,000 homes and businesses across the greater Reno-Sparks area, was forced to rely on backup water supplies to meet summer water demand for the first time in 20 years.

“We’re off to a better start this year than last year but it’s too early to predict what the rest of the winter will hold,” said Mark Foree, the water authority’s general manager. “Hopefully we will get to the point of something close to an average year or maybe better. We just don’t know.”

Each of the first three months of the current water year, which started in October, has produced below-average precipitation, said Chad Blanchard, federal water master. As of Monday, rain and melted snow measured at Tahoe City in December was 4.57 inches, or about 83 percent of average amounts, Blanchard said.

“We’re doing better for sure than last year but it doesn’t look good at this time,” Blanchard said. “It just puts us on track for our fourth dry year.”

January is typically the most significant month for mountain snowfall. And that makes January 2015 a particularly important month for the region at this point in history.

“If things don’t pick up in January, it just gets that much harder to pull out,” Blanchard said. “We do have a lot of winter left so there’s still time to turn it around. We’re not giving up hope.”

Sierra snowpack, Dec. 29.

Truckee River Basin, 2014: 67 percent.

Truckee River Basin, 2013: 23 percent.

Lake Tahoe Basin, 2014: 44 percent.

Lake Tahoe Basin, 2013: 35 percent.

Source: U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service

California snow survey shows higher snowpack

By KRISTIN J. BENDER
Associated Press

ECHO SUMMIT, Calif. (AP) - The winter's first survey of the Sierra Nevada snowpack found more snow than last year at this time, but officials said much more is needed to end the California drought.

The Department of Water Resources conducted the survey Tuesday at an elevation of about 6,800 feet some 90 miles east of Sacramento.

Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program, said there were 21.3 inches of snow on the ground after recent heavy storms.

It was more snow than this time last year, but the water content was still far below average for the date.

California's snowpack supplies about a third of the water needed by state residents, agriculture and industry as it melts in the late spring and summer.

"California needs much more rain and snow than we've experienced over the past two years to end the drought in 2015," said department Director Mark Cowin. "The department encourages Californians to continue their water conservation practices."

Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency Jan. 17.

After three years of drought, most storms that drenched the state this month have been powerful but relatively warm, delivering above-average rainfall to most of the state while providing a modest early winter snowpack.

The water content of the snow measured Tuesday was about 33 percent of average.

Statewide, 105 electronic sensors in the Sierra detected a water content of about 50 percent of the multi-year average for the day. That compares favorably with last winter's first survey, when the snowpack water content statewide was only 20 percent of normal, which tied with 2012 as the driest readings on record.

Tuesday's readings indicate that water content in the northern mountains is 20 percent of the average on April 1, when it normally peaks before the spring melt.

The Department of Water Resources and other agencies conduct manual snow surveys around the first of the month between January and May to check the accuracy of real-time electronic readings.

More snow is good news for those heading to the mountains to celebrate the arrival of 2015.

"Skiers have certainly enjoyed the early season snow storms, and cold temperatures have offered ideal conditions for snowmaking," said Rachael Woods, a spokeswoman for Northstar California Resort. "We'll ring in the New Year with fresh snow on the slopes."

The company operates the Heavenly, Northstar and Kirkwood facilities in the state.

(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli). Frank Gehrke, chief of California Cooperative Snow Surveys Program for the Department of Water Resources, left, pulls the snow depth survey pole from the snow pack as he conducts the first snow survey of the season at Ech...

Snow Storm Brings Snow Pack Help

Posted: Dec 30, 2014 2:52 PM PST Tuesday, December 30, 2014 5:52 PM EST*Updated: Dec 30, 2014 2:56 PM PST* Tuesday, December 30, 2014 5:56 PM EST
By John Potter
Email
Connect
producers@ktvn.com
Will the snowpack come through, or are there hints of another winter of drought? An early chapter on our Sierra snowpack was written today, as experts took their first winter tally. We met with them, to see how big of a start the snow season is really having.
Today, we saw some blinding white encouragement, changing the snowpack's personality from dismal to hopeful, after today's bitterly cold blast of snow.

Our trek into the powdery wilderness up at the Mt. Rose summit to look it all over was a good one. Today's snow was sweet, after 3 years that were more empty than full. But even though we're surrounded by new snow up there, today's storm was just a drop in a half-full bucket. As Jeff Anderson, the water supply specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service told us, “We need some really big storms."

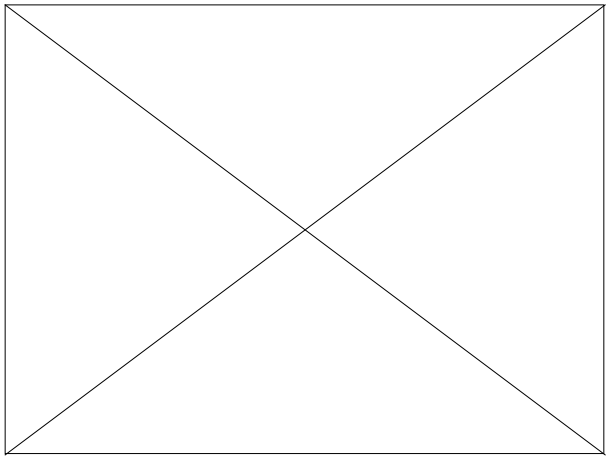
Anderson has been measuring snow packs for 9 years now. For him, the good news is that the big snow months, January and February, are still ahead. But already, even after this storm, we're down from last year. He told us that as of now, “We're looking at just over 3 feet of snow on the ground at the Mt. Rose Snotel site. Its 60% of normal for this date, so we need 40% more than that."

All that snow is not just for skiers. Our drinking water and irrigation is up there…a giant, frozen bank that feeds streams and the Truckee as it melts. Time will tell if this winter will pay off. For now, the first measure of the season contains just ho-hum numbers. That concerns federal water master Chad Blanchard. As he told us, “The first 3 months of this water year have been below average, following 3 below-average years, so we still have time. We still have time to turn it around."

Chad is hopeful for one big reason…in all 104 years of record-taking, we have never had 4 dry winters in a row at Tahoe. All eyes now will be on the weather from now to spring, before all worries of a fourth drought year…are completely put to bed.

Watch for leaks, check pipes during northern Nevada cold snap

- Video



- Protecting your pipes, winterizing your home

Print Story
Published: 1/01 9:14 am
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Updated: 1/01 9:17 am
RENO, Nev. (MyNews4.com & KRNV) -- It's no secret that cold temperatures have recently hit northern Nevada; and the Truckee Meadows Water Authority says they need help from the community.

With over 1,300 miles of water pipelines to manage, officials say they need your help in spotting breaks and leaks in the water system.

TMWA says if you see a leak, they have staff available around the clock to invstigate.

They also say you can protect your pipes from freezing temperatures by winterizing your home and irrigation system.

The Reno Fire Department also has a reminder for homeowners.

As temperatures continue to drop, the pipes in your fire sprinkler system could freeze and break.

If you have any concerns, fire authorities suggest contacting your licensed fire sprinkler contractor immediately and have your system inspected

TWMA is getting 24,000 new water customers on Thursday

Jeff DeLong, RGJ 2:25 p.m. PST December 31, 2014

Tim Flanagan of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority tests water at the utility's Chalk Bluff water treatment plant in 2002, one year after the authority was established. On Jan. 1, the authority merges operations with the Washoe County Department of Water Resources.(Photo: RGJ file)

The ability to better manage precious water resources across Reno-Sparks and outlying areas will be significantly enhanced with Thursday's merger of the region's two largest water providers and rates paid by all water customers should remain unchanged for the foreseeable future, supporters of the long-discussed action say.

On Jan. 1, the area's largest water purveyor, the Truckee Meadows Water Authority, will take over operation of the water systems previously operated by the Washoe County Department of Water Resources and the South Truckee Meadows General Improvement District.

The merger, years in the making, will boost the water authority's customers from an existing 95,000 by an additional 24,000, with the expanded utility then serving some 119,000 homes and businesses across the greater Reno-Sparks area.

"We're just about there. Everything is lined up," said Mark Foree, the water authority's general manager.

The merger represents a major milestone in a process that essentially began in 2001 with the creation of the water authority and the takeover by Reno, Sparks and Washoe County of the water system previously operated privately by Sierra Pacific Resources.

"The first, best decision was for our community to take control of our water resources," said Jeff Tissier, the utility's finance chief. "The next best decision was to consolidate."

Indeed, initial discussions regarding the potential consolidation of the water authority and the county's water system began not long after the new utility was formed. The concept then became a centerpiece of discussions by a legislative subcommittee that convened in 2006 to explore water issues affecting Washoe County.

Formal votes to merge the county's water system with the water authority were made by the Washoe County Commission and the utility's board of directors in January 2010. An agreement between the utility and 4,000-customer South Truckee Meadows General Improvement District was agreed upon in December 2013.

"You can't imagine the effort that went into this," Tissier said of the lengthy process to ensure merger of the water utilities was financially feasible and could occur with no harm to any affected customers. Rates paid for water by customers of any of the three merged utilities are not expected to change anytime in the near future.

"We're very confident no customer rates will have to change," Foree said. "All along we wanted to make sure no customer group would be adversely impacted and we were able to achieve that."

The biggest benefit to consolidation, Foree said, is an improved and broadened ability to manage water resources across the region.

That opportunity could soon be demonstrated along the Mount Rose fan south of Reno, where groundwater pumping by municipal wells operated by Washoe County sucked dry dozens of private domestic wells used by homeowners in the Callahan Ranch area.

The water authority will take over operation of a program established by the county in 2011 to provide financial aid to help homeowners affected by groundwater pumping with the cost of hooking up to public water distribution systems.

"It's a pretty good program the county put in place. We're just adopting it," Foree said.

More importantly, Foree said, the consolidation should provide a promising opportunity to help address the long-standing groundwater problem in the area.

That can happen by diverting more of the surface water owned by the water authority to the affected area during the winter, lessening dependence on groundwater and allowing wells there to recharge more effectively, Foree said.

“It’s not going to happen overnight but over time, that’s going to get better,” he said of the situation there. “It’s one of the big benefits really – improved water resource management. We will be able to do a much better job with that and that’s going to be a real benefit to the community.”

By the numbers

95,000: Previous homes and businesses served by TMWA.

20,000: Previous water customers of Washoe County.

4,000: Previous water customers of South Truckee Meadows GID.

119,000: New customer base of TMWA.

Editorial: Nevada needs state water panel? Not really

The Opinion of the RGJ Editorial Board 12:06 a.m. PST January 4, 2015

The normally submerged pilings of a old pier in August at Lake Tahoe. Gov. Brian Sandoval said at the 18th Annual Lake Tahoe summit that the declining lake level is a sign of damage caused by three years of drought.(Photo: Rich Pedroncelli/AP)

When the Nevada Legislature starts its new session next month, one proposal it will look at is whether to create a committee to develop a state water plan.

Nevada is the driest state in the union, the Reno-Sparks area is in its third year of drought, and projections of more people and businesses will only increase water demands. Developing a new statewide plan seems like a no-brainer.

This intuition is wrong.

The Legislature and governor decided water issues are better handled at the local level 15 years ago when they disbanded the state Division of Water Planning. This system has not been perfect, but it has worked well and should not be upended without strong justification.

The proposal being pushed, as reported last week by RGJ reporter Jeff DeLong, would create a statewide committee consisting of regional water authorities, the Colorado River Commission of Nevada and the state Division of Water Resources. It would study how much water Nevada has and how much will be needed based on population growth and land-use changes.

Supporters claim regional water authorities — such as Truckee Meadows Water Authority, which handles water for Reno-Sparks — overestimate their water supplies and underestimate future demands. State leadership, they say, is needed to bring about an honest accounting.

They say the state can force the various water agencies to come together, it can bring in third parties to check the reported numbers, and it is strong enough to make sure something is done with the committee's findings.

Further, the argument is made that parts of the state are doing well water-wise and others are not, and state leaders should understand the big picture so they can deal with Nevada's overall needs.

Plan supporters also worry Nevada's big water players could use their strength to take water from weaker rural counties.

A possible example is playing out right now. The Southern Nevada Water Authority is trying to build a 300-mile pipeline from rural eastern Nevada counties to serve the Las Vegas area.

This case actually supports the current system. Las Vegas' water issues would not have been solved by state planning or forecasting. The Colorado River, which supplies Las Vegas, is facing its worst drought in 1,250 years. That is correct. The drought in the Colorado River Basin, now in its 15th year, is the worst for that region since the late 700s.

The southern water authority foresaw this problem and has been seeking alternative sources for years — with help from the state.

Wanting the state to be in charge of the big picture for water is understandable. The question is whether a new state committee would solve concerns, or at least set in motion something that would do a better job than what is in place now.

•**Concern #1:** Bad numbers from regional water authorities.

The numbers are public and can be investigated by anyone who thinks they do not add up. If problems are found, they can be addressed at the local level by voting out the public officials who serve as members of regional water authority boards.

•**Concern #2:** Lack of a big picture.

Water sources are far apart in Nevada. The Colorado and Truckee rivers are governed by vastly different agreements and laws; they would not fit easily under one umbrella. This is part of why the governor and Legislature already decided the state does not need control over the big picture.

•**Concern #3:** Disparate water interests in Nevada do not work together enough.

They seldom work together because, as mentioned, their water sources are not related. Also, different parties can work together when needed.

A good example is the Truckee River Operating Agreement. Water agencies from the state governments of California and Nevada, TMWA, the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, the U.S. Geological Survey and others hammered out an agreement on Truckee River water usage that goes into effect this year. (One bonus: TMWA says the pact will triple the drought water storage it has access to by making available federal reservoirs on the California side.)

•**Concern #4:** Water being taken from smaller counties to support bigger ones.

Solving this concern may cause unintended consequences. If the state is given more power to protect smaller players, it could use that same power to muck with water in more populated areas. The Tesla factory coming to Storey County is already eyeing Reno-Sparks' effluent because it needs lots of water.

With the new water plan idea, there is an assumption the state will do a better job. What if it did not? Think of the many state committees and commissions that have studied Nevada's tax system. The state has not used its power to implement their dire recommendations.

Planning is good. Getting stakeholders together to discuss issues and long-range goals is good. This happens now with water handled at the regional level where the people of Nevada have more control. A new state committee is not needed