

Lake Powell Pipeline approved for environmental analysis

[David DeMille](#) Updated 12:50 p.m. MT Dec. 12, 2017

Utah water managers are now a step closer to completing plans to draw more water out of the Colorado River, with federal regulators announcing Monday night that the Lake Powell Pipeline is ready for a full environmental analysis.

In agreeing to move ahead with the environmental analysis, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission launches a 60-day period for public comment on the project, which has been controversial in communities along the Colorado, a river system that supplies water to some 40 million people across seven states but is [in danger of shrinking supplies](#) because of climate change and overuse.

“This is a major milestone toward meeting southern Utah’s need to diversify its water supply and develop resources to meet anticipated demand,” said Eric Millis, director of the Utah Division of Water Resources. “Permitting a water project is a lengthy process and this is a significant step.”

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The proposed 140-mile pipeline would carry up to 77 million gallons per day

from Lake Powell through a buried 69-inch pipe to Sand Hollow Reservoir near St. George. It is [projected to cost](#) somewhere between \$1.1 billion and \$1.8 billion to build.

State and local water managers [say the project is needed](#) sometimes in the 2020s, based on the area's [fast-paced population growth](#) and expectations for new development.

It is already more than a decade in the making, with the state Legislature passing a law in 2006 outlining the demand for the project and with state water managers having spent more than 10 years and more than \$30 million on studies.

"Obviously this is an important milestone, there's no question about that," said Ron Thompson, general manager of the Washington County Water Conservancy District, suggesting he thought it could be another two years before a final record of decision is reached. "We have had lots of public hearings on the study plans and other data, but this is where everything starts to come together."

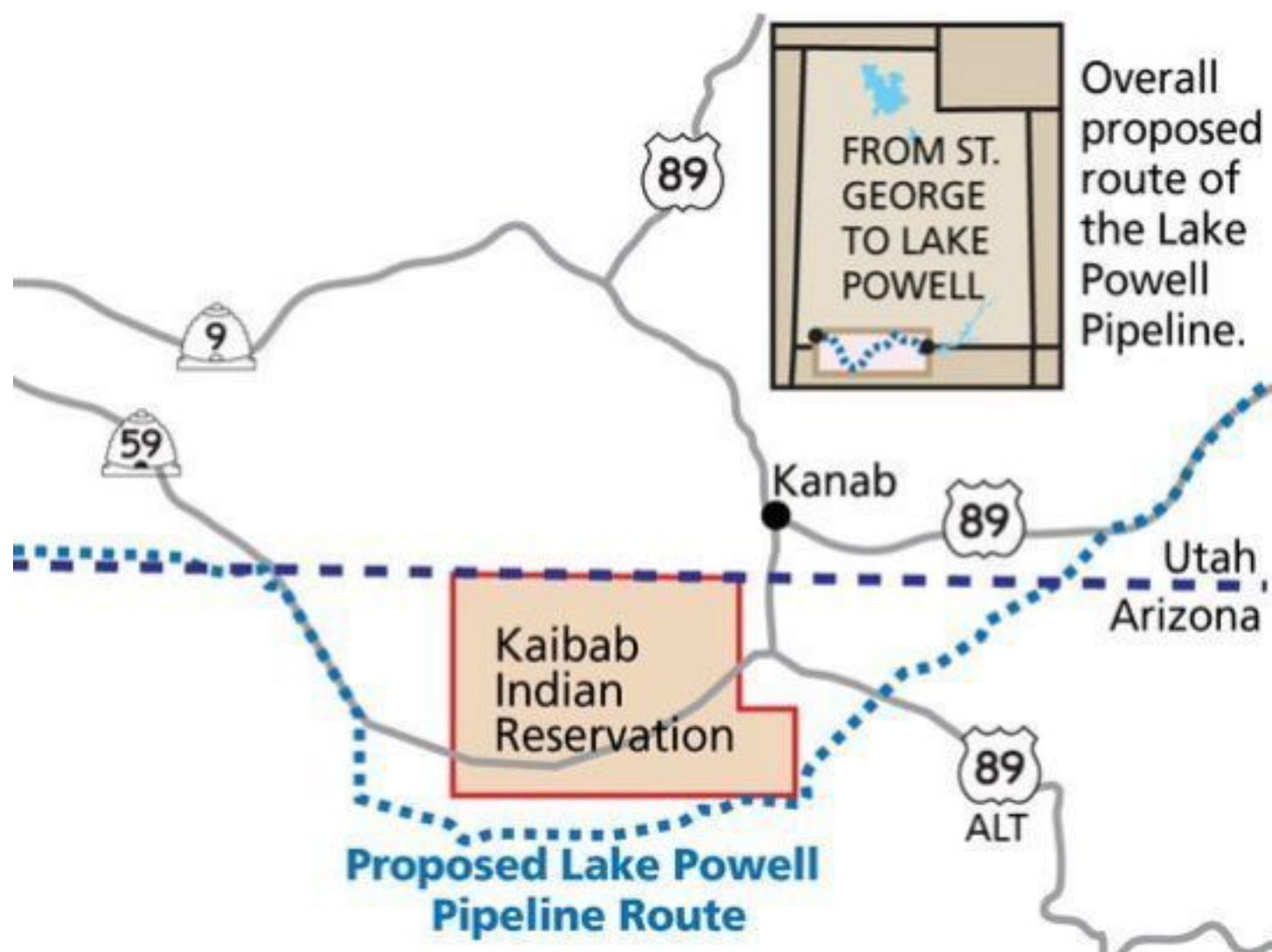
Climate change is also [expected to reduce supplies](#) out of the Virgin River, and local officials have voiced concern about depending only on that source, arguing for the much larger Colorado as a more viable long-term alternative.

Federal and state agencies are now authorized to issue recommendations and set new terms and conditions for the project, with the public given two months to weigh in as well, either by submitting a letter to FERC or filing one online at www.ferc.gov/docs-filing/efiling.asp, using the project number 12966.

FERC was picked as the federal agency to handle the pipeline because of proposed hydroelectric facilities that would be built along the pipeline. The water would be pumped out of Lake Powell to a high point within the boundaries of what had been the Grand Staircase-Escalante National

Monument, then flow downhill toward St. George, passing through a series of hydroelectric turbines along the way. There are currently six different hydroelectric facilities proposed, along with related transmission lines.

FERC could decide to only approve the power generating facilities and not the intervening water pipelines, meaning the project could also require separate rights-of-way permits to cross lands managed by agencies like the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.



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The route of the Lake Powell Pipeline is still uncertain, with Utah officials proposing the project go around the Kaibab Paiute Tribe reservation but tribal leaders asking to be included in the project. (Photo: *The Spectrum & Daily News*)

One key issue is [a request from the Kaibab Paiute Tribe](#) to route the pipeline on a more direct path through its reservation. State water managers have proposed going around the reservation, making the pipeline much longer but

avoiding the need to negotiate with tribal leaders.

The pipeline, like several other proposed projects proposed along the Colorado, has been controversial.

The pipeline has been criticized as being too expensive for southwestern Utah communities, and for being unnecessary because of the area's relatively high per-capita water usage rates.

State water managers have suggested that water users in Washington County and neighboring Kane County would likely need to increase water rates, charge higher impact fees on new construction and increase taxes in order to pay their ends of the pipeline.



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(Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)

At the same time, state managers are counting on the Utah Legislature to use

the state's borrowing power to bond for the up-front construction costs, with taxpayers statewide then helping to foot the bill.

Exactly how much the pipeline will cost and how the local communities will pay back the state [are still uncertain](#), with the specifics still to be hashed out once the federal review is completed.

A group of economists from Utah universities have led an effort to [question the economic feasibility](#) of the project.

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How to comment

- The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is taking public comment on the Lake Powell Pipeline. The agency encourages electronic filing via its website, www.ferc.gov/docs-filing/efiling.asp, and the project number is P-12966. Paper copies can be mailed to Secretary, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, 888 First Street, NE, Washington, D.C. 20426. The first page of any filing must include the docket number P-12966-004.