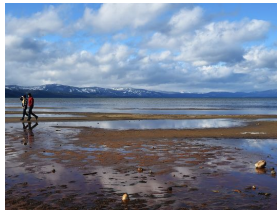


Nevada — the driest state — has no statewide water plan



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



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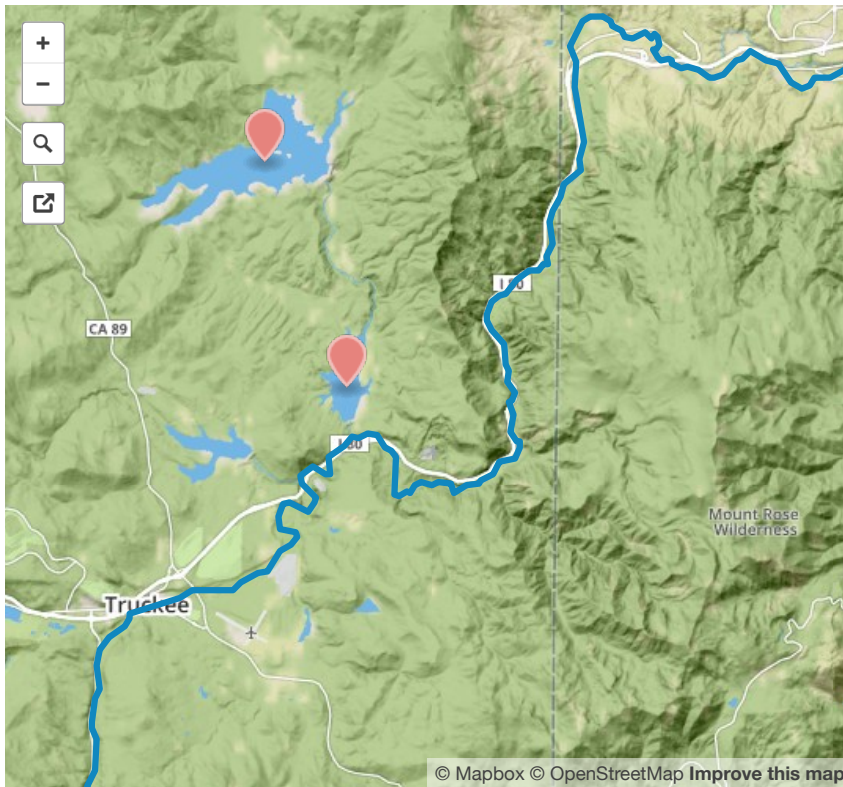
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"Our suggestion is rather than a silo approach we need a much broader approach," said Steve Bradhurst, executive director of the eight-county Central Nevada Regional Water Authority, which encompasses 65 percent of Nevada's land mass.

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.



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."

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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."



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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."

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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

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