

Mesquite on water quest; Thirsty, booming town in northeastern Clark County looks to Arizona
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By Launce Rake, staff writer

The scenario sounds familiar: A city water district looks to a rural area for huge supplies of the resource, a move that raises an outcry from the rural residents who fear their wells will dry up.

But this case involves not Las Vegas and rural White Pine County, but the small city of Mesquite and rural communities just across the Arizona state line, about 10 miles away. A limited liability company registered in Arizona, but with offices in Mesquite, wants to export 14,000 acre-feet of water annually from Arizona to the fast-growing community in northeastern Clark County.

The proposal makes sense to Michael Winters, general manager of the Virgin Valley Water District, which supplies Mesquite and Bunkerville customers with water. The district now uses 5,500 acre-feet of ground water, but the agency is struggling with growing demand and high arsenic levels in some wells.

An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, and can typically supply one or two Southern Nevada households a year.

Winters said the district spends almost \$500 to treat and deliver an acre-foot of water. Wind River Resources LLC promises to bring an acre-foot of water to Mesquite for \$300 to \$450, he said.

"A year ago, maybe two years ago, we had a company approach us from Beaver Dam (Arizona) and ask us if we would be interested in bringing 14,000 acre-feet to Mesquite," Winters said. "It was a great deal. We approved it, but we said they have to do the legwork."

The company also would treat the water, delivering it ready-to-use, he said. The company's proposal notes that the Arizona water could be mixed with the arsenic-heavy water from Mesquite to bring the Nevada community's water into federal compliance.

Mesquite's drinking water has almost three times the federal limit for arsenic, and the Environmental Protection Agency has given the water district until 2009 to bring the drinking water into compliance. Five new treatment plants to do just that could cost \$17 million.

Michael Johnson, water district hydrologist, said that regardless of whether the district can get the water from Arizona, the district will have to go forward with the treatment plants. He said that the water purchase makes sense but shouldn't be confused with the contentious plans of neighboring Las Vegas.

Unlike the much bigger, 180,000 acre-foot transfer of rural water envisioned by the Southern Nevada Water Authority to supply growing Las Vegas, the water Mesquite would purchase comes from the same "basin," or valley as Beaver Dam.

"This is not an interbasin transfer," Johnson said. "This is water from the same basin. It's all the Lower Virgin River hydrographic basin."

Johnson said the district already serves a handful of Arizona users with about 50 acre-feet of water annually. If it brought more water from Arizona, more would likely go back to Arizona as part of the deal, he said, but how much is not clear.

Steve MacIntyre, Wind River Resources managing director and a Beaver Dam resident, said there is enough water to support the company's proposal and the development in Arizona: a sustainable 45,000 acre-feet.

Also, the residents of Arizona are drawing their water from a shallow aquifer, while the company's withdrawal would be from a separate, deeper supply, he said. Finally, the growth of the Beaver Dam-Littlefield area is tied to the growth of nearby Mesquite.

"How does Beaver Dam benefit if we restrict the growth of Mesquite?" MacIntyre asked. "Beaver Dam is effectively a suburb of Mesquite."

Some residents of northwest Arizona are still less than enthusiastic. Bob Frisby, a developer based in tiny Beaver Dam, Ariz., said he fears that long-term economic development in his community will end if the ground water goes to Mesquite.

"What little water is available should stay in Arizona for the Arizona residents to use," Frisby said. "Why should one group of people profit \$6 million a year and sell out our livelihood?"

"It's a limited resource and we're a growing community. We're working on becoming a city up here, incorporating. We've got a school and a high school up here, but we need a hospital. We need a fire department and a police department. It's a good location and it's got excellent water."

Frisby and some of his neighbors have already protested the ground water plan at meetings in Nevada and Arizona.

Herb Guenther, director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources, said that a hearing will be held in January, but the department is planning a public meeting on the issue in northwest Arizona in November.

He said the applicants have to prove sustainable water availability and that no long- or short-term harm will come to existing Arizona users. His department also must review nearly 2,000 pages of documents already submitted to the state.

Frisby predicted sizable protest in Arizona: "There's going to be a groundswell over this permit from Phoenix to Littlefield to Beaver Dam.

Water has never been approved to take out of the state of Arizona. If it is, it will set a precedent. It's a resource we need for our children." #