

# Audit finds boondoggle at the dam

Visitor center bill has jumped \$87 million – and it's rising

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A federal audit sharply criticizes the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation for its out-of-control spending on Hoover Dam's new multimillion-dollar tourist stop.

The watchdog arm of the Department of Interior faulted the bureau for weak budgetary controls and inaccurate cost estimates for the visitor center, now under construction.

In 10 years, the project went from \$32 million to \$119 million, and it is still rising.

"This report confirms that incompetency reigned at the very top," said Sen. Richard Bryan, D-Nev., who along with Sen. Harry Reid, has loudly condemned the project, labeling it a nightmare of government waste.

The inspector general's audit recommended that the bureau speed construction of the visitor center, scheduled to open this spring, to save money. It also suggested an improved budget system to guard against runaway costs.

Bureau Commissioner Dan Beard, who requested the audit, said he owes it to the

# Dam

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taxpayers to implement the recommendations and go a step further. Beard was appointed head of the agency a year ago.

"We can't change the amount of money that has been wasted on the Hoover Dam Visitor Center," he said. "But we can make sure there are no new wasteful boondoggles looming on the horizon."

Federal officials are not alone in criticizing the visitor center. Overton Power Co., which serves the Moapa Valley, sued the government for the increased costs and lost. It is appealing the decision.

Overton Power spokesman Kent Bloomfield said the audit lends support to the argument that all taxpayers — not just those who buy electricity from Hoover Dam — should pay for the project.

The audit will be used during congressional hearings aimed at determining how the project's cost rose, who authorized it and who will pay for the project.

The audit places responsibility for the escalated costs on two positions — the assistant commissioner for engineering and research and the Boulder City regional director. A handful of people held those positions be-

tween 1984 and 1994.

The role of the assistant commissioner was to prepare construction cost estimates for the project, while the regional director had the task of managing the construction and funding oversight.

The reclamation agency based its original \$32 million request to Congress on inadequate information, the audit found. And after getting congressional approval, the bureau increased the visitor center designs without readily identifying the changes, according to the 20-page report.

The agency exercised "little oversight and control over the costs" of the project, the audit stated.

The 49,000-square-foot center will have a three-screen rotating theater, two 50-passenger elevators and an educational desert scene. The project also includes a five-story parking garage.

It is expected to boost the number of people who take the dam tour from 700,000 to 1 million each year.

More than 29 million people have taken the Hoover Dam tour, the most heavily visited dam in the United States.