

METRO/STATE

Time running short for new water project

By Mary Manning

LAS VEGAS SUN

Unless the 24-year-old Southern Nevada Water System is expanded, Las Vegas Valley residents could experience water shortages by summer 1997.

Responding to rapid growth in Southern Nevada and strains on water delivery, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Colorado River Commission have completed an environmental assessment of a project that will expand the treatment and delivery of water from Lake Mead.

In 1993, the average water

use each month in Las Vegas was 283 million gallons a day. Demand predicted for 1997 exceeds 400 million gallons a day, the assessment states.

"Time is our biggest enemy," said Norman Anderson, permitting manager for Carollo, Black & Veatch, the consulting firm in charge of the assessment.

If the project is not ready by May 1997, Las Vegas might not meet its water demands, Anderson said. Typically, water use peaks in July and August.

It will take an estimated \$160 million to \$190 million to expand the system, Anderson said.

No major environmental impacts are anticipated in the assessment because the core system already exists. The system draws Colorado River water from Lake Mead to the Alfred Merrit Smith Water Treatment Facility and then distributes it to Las Vegas, North Las Vegas and Henderson.

Dust raised around construction sites and some impacts on the threatened Mojave Desert tortoise and bighorn sheep are the biggest worries for project contractors, Anderson said.

To settle dust, dirt roads will be paved and watering will occur at construction sites at the plant

and in the three cities, he said.

The Bureau of Reclamation and the Colorado River Commission agreed to a strict plan to minimize effects on the desert tortoise. The plan states that every worker on the project will be educated about tortoise habits and all construction areas will be surveyed by qualified desert tortoise biologists.

Tunneling in the River Mountains may disturb the bighorn sheep, jackrabbits and birds such as the peregrine falcon and the bald eagle.

Although the volcanic rocks of the River Mountains contain several earthquake faults,

geologists believe they have been inactive for 2 million years.

"The existing River Mountain tunnel, located in the same area, has been in operation for over 20 years without interruption due to seismic activity," the assessment said. The area experienced two moderate earthquakes, between magnitudes 4 and 5, between 1932 and 1960.

There are no rare or endangered plants on the sites, according to the environmental assessment, and no local government or other institutions criticized the proposal, said Ken MacDonald of the consulting

firm Dames & Moore.

In the cities, traffic disruption when installing water lines may delay motorists, MacDonald said.

The additional pipelines parallel existing lines. Precise routes will be set by city and county public works departments, based on alternative routes in the environmental assessment.

Instead of ripping up roads in urban areas, contractors will bore holes and thread pipe underground without trenches whenever possible, MacDonald said.

The nearest homes are one mile west of the project area.