

COLUMN ONE

Las Vegas looks north to slake its thirst

Vegas' drinking problem is Nevada ranchers' headache as officials look to tap groundwater in rural counties to slake a thirst for growth.

By Bettina Boxall, Times Staff Writer
March 7, 2007

ce
or
A
d



water worries
click to enlarge



Drying up
click to enlarge



Czar
click to enlarge

Importing water

The Southern Nevada Water Authority plans to pump ground water from seven basins and pipe it to the Las Vegas Valley and southern Lincoln County.

- Pipeline
- Pumping stations
- Underground reservoir

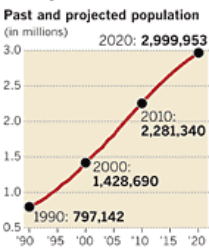


Sources: Southern Nevada Water Authority, ESRI, TeleAtlas, USGS
MARK HAPER Los Angeles Times

GRAPHIC

Population growth

Nevada's Clark County, home to Las Vegas, has experienced rapid growth in recent years. It is expected to continue.



Sources: Annual estimates through

Baker, Nev. — WHEN rancher Dean Baker and his three grown sons gathered for their regular 6:30 a.m. coffee klatch a few years ago, the topic went beyond the usual cow-calf talk. Should they fight or sell out?

Three hundred miles to the south, Las Vegas' determined water czar, Pat Mulroy, was laying ambitious plans to pump rural Nevada groundwater to her booming city of dancing casino fountains and new housing tracts.

One branch of the \$2-billion-plus pipeline project would reach into the high desert valley straddling the Utah border where the Baker family has ranched for half a century.

As Baker remembers the family meeting, it didn't last long. "It was unanimous, without any question." They would fight.

Battles over water in the West are always about something more. At their most elemental, they are about survival. As Baker sees it, the Nevada water war threatens to reprise the unhappy scene in California's Owens Valley, which dried up decades ago after Los Angeles drained it.

And, like L.A.'s legendary water engineer, William Mulholland, Mulroy sees the distant water as the key to her city's future. The struggle pits a neon-lighted big city against scrub-crustured cattle country, a tart-tongued immigrant against a slow-talking third-generation rancher, a vision of the New West against the values of the old.

MULROY is one of Nevada's most powerful public officials, a Democrat who is periodically mentioned as a potential gubernatorial candidate.

She is on a mission to make up for the historic slight her adopted state suffered when Colorado River flows were split among the seven basin states in the 1920s. At the time, Las Vegas was little more than a dusty railroad stop, so Nevada received the smallest river share in the lower basin. It is on that comparatively meager portion that the Las Vegas Valley relies for 90% of its water.

"The Nevada state engineer had no vision," Mulroy says, bristling at the long-ago snub. "And we're just going to accept that as our manifest destiny in a state where we're the economic hub?"

She leans forward in a big office chair, carefully made up and clad in a sharply tailored pantsuit. She is intense and emphatic. Her tone provides a glimpse of the tough, smart water boss known for blunt negotiating tactics.

After she became general manager of the Las Vegas Valley Water District, Mulroy consolidated her power in 1991 by persuading local water agencies to stop competing against one another and form a strong regional entity, the Southern Nevada Water Authority, which she has since also headed. She found a powerful ally in Nevada's Democratic Sen. Harry Reid, now majority leader, who included a free right-of-way for the pipeline in a public lands bill.

Last year, not long before the Nevada state engineer held hearings on part of the groundwater proposal, Mulroy warned that if he didn't approve the pumping, growth in the Las Vegas Valley would grind to a halt within a decade.

She pointedly noted in a newspaper interview that the "governor can remove the state engineer and appoint a new one," a comment she later insisted had been taken out of context and was not the threat it appeared to be.

Colorado River politics have been compared to those of the Middle East, but without the guns — an analogy that partly explains Mulroy's long staying power. Her youthful ambition was to work for the U.S. State Department.

She grew up in Germany, the daughter of an American father who was a personnel officer for the U.S. military and a German mother who survived three Allied bombing raids and went on to do housekeeping and translation for American generals.

Her father was a stickler for language — she speaks without a trace of an accent — and Mulroy always wanted to live in the U.S. She got her chance when a University of Nevada-Las Vegas dean who knew her program head at the University of Munich offered her a senior scholarship and a teaching assistantship to pursue a master's in German literature.

"That was my ticket," she says. "So I packed up all my belongings, and on Aug. 24, 1974, I landed at McCarran International Airport."

She arrived at night, checked into a motel and encountered her first round bed and mirrored ceiling. The next morning she peered out the window, expecting Sahara-like sand dunes.

Instead she found herself in the land of kitsch. "I was in shock. The whole thing was like an out-of-body experience."

Except for a brief doctoral stint at Stanford cut short by financial pressures, she has stayed in Las Vegas, first working for Clark County government and then the Las Vegas Valley Water District. She married a native Nevadan, with whom she has two college-age children.

"It just became home," says Mulroy, 54. "I had grown to appreciate its quiriness and how different it is."

Las Vegas receives an average of 4 inches of rain annually, making it the driest metropolitan area in the country. But rather than embrace the desert, the city famously lured visitors and residents with a fantasy land of golf courses, casino fountains and sprawling pool complexes.

In the early 1990s, Mulroy defiantly proclaimed that as long as farmers continued to pour water on cotton fields in the desert, there was no reason for Las Vegas to give up their pools and lawns.

She has since mellowed on that point. "I've learned a lot," she says. "If you don't learn something in 13 years, God help you."

Though she defends the casinos' showy water use as vital to the Strip's economy, her agency now has one of the country's most aggressive outdoor water conservation programs. It pays homeowners and businesses to rip out lawns and replace them with xeriscaping, reducing water consumption even as Clark County's population — now at almost 1.9 million — continues its dizzying climb.

Mulroy admonishes that "how we live in the desert has to change dramatically" and shows off a state-of-the-art community complex the Southern Nevada Water Authority is building to promote water-thrifty ways.

But she insists conservation alone won't sustain Las Vegas' growth. And an ongoing drought in the Colorado basin undermined her plans to acquire surplus river water in the coming years.

So she returned to a groundwater plan shelved in the early 1990s amid statewide protests. The pared-down project would take water from Snake Valley in White Pine County and six other basins along a 300-hundred-mile line running north of Las Vegas.

The project is under review by the state engineer, who has yet to hold hearings on Snake Valley, where Baker lives, but is expected to decide soon on a neighboring basin.

Comparisons to Los Angeles' water grab in the Eastern Sierra incense Mulroy, whose agency has bought full-page ads in White Pine County newspapers, assuring locals they are protected by environmental laws. She has repeatedly promised to adjust the pumping if it starts to affect local supplies.

But even if she wins, Mulroy doesn't see the rural groundwater slaking Las Vegas' thirst.

Eventually, she says — and she concedes it may take decades of political wrangling — Las Vegas will pay for ocean desalination plants on the California or Mexican coasts and exchange that water for a larger share of the Colorado River.

BAKER can't imagine why anyone would want to live in Las Vegas — or any city, for that matter. "I think it's sad — the population, the lack of open space," he says.

Baker once stood toe-to-toe with Mulroy, arguing in a blistering Las Vegas parking lot. "She has a little bit of a reputation for letting her mouth run away with her," he says archly. He worries about her political influence and doesn't think she can keep her promises.

Still, he says, "I get madder at the attitude of Las Vegas. They think they have a right to whatever Nevada has."

He is 67, a four-times-married Republican whose fashion sense runs to out-of-style aviator glasses and plaid shirts.

His family's 12,000-acre cattle operation is worth a fortune — a broker recently offered him \$20 million on behalf of a real estate investor. But his house, decorated with an "Enjoy Beef for Health" sign, is the size of a Brentwood garage and located behind a gas station.

"It's a matter of values," Baker says. "As long as I'm warm and well-fed, personal things don't count.... If it was just about money, we'd just sell to the Southern Nevada Water Authority."

His farmer grandparents settled in Delta, Utah, 100 miles to the east, nearly a century

ago. In the 1950s, his father started working on an alfalfa seed ranch in Baker — a speck of a town that just happened to share their name — and later bought the operation. The family acquired more acreage and is now the biggest private landowner in Snake Valley — which, like the rest of Nevada, is mostly owned by the federal government.

In college, Baker dabbled in premed and civil engineering and wound up with a business degree from the University of Utah. But by his second year, he knew he wanted to return to the ranch.

Baker and his sons — he also has an attorney daughter who lives in Palo Alto — irrigate 5,000 acres of feed crops and pasture, sell hay to Las Vegas horse owners and California dairies and run 2,000 cows with their calves on federal scrubland and irrigated meadows.

The county gets only about 9 inches of rain a year. Baker's water comes from streams and wells fed by mountain snowmelt and underground aquifers, including an ancient one underlying much of the Great Basin in Nevada and western Utah.

Baker knows from local experience the harm groundwater pumping can do.

"This trough was always full," he says, tramping over a light winter snow to an old livestock watering area at Needle Point Spring, just over the state line in Utah.

Ever since 1939, when the Civilian Conservation Corps developed the spring from a seep, Needle Point reliably filled a beat-up trough and an adjacent pond frequented by livestock and wild horses.

Then one summer day in 2001, Baker got a call from federal land managers: A dozen wild horses had died of thirst nearby.

The spring level had dropped a couple of feet, just enough to stop the flow of water. The likely cause, a federal scientist concluded, was another rancher's increased pumping to irrigate fields a mile away.

"This is clear documentation of what pumping does to a well," Baker says, brandishing a paper with a graph line that traces Needle Point's decline. "There's not enough water to do what they want to do."

In neighboring Spring Valley, ranchers have reaped millions selling their land and water rights to Mulroy's agency. The county to the south, Lincoln, cut a water deal with her.

But in Snake Valley, where greasewood flats stretch up to a namesake mountain range studded with juniper and pinyon pine, and where cattle outnumber people, the Bakers and their neighbors have dug in their booted heels.

They are a contrary bunch: longtime ranchers, the occasional polygamist family, a small Christian community that runs a dairy and liberal Democrats attracted by the place's lean beauty.

"To have it sucked dry and basically destroyed, for what? It's not a good trade-off — more Las Vegas and less space," says Jo Anne Garrett, 82, who moved here from California more than three decades ago and built a glass-and-timber house in the shadow of 13,000-foot Wheeler Peak.

Two years ago, voters in the 9,500-resident county — the entire population could fit into the Strip's MGM Grand Hotel — ousted two commissioners for being too willing to deal with Las Vegas. In local parades, pumping foes tow a flatbed trailer with a huge water bucket painted with the warning: "Keep your pipes out of our aquifer."

The rest of the time, the bucket is parked in front of the Border Inn, a combination motel/convenience store/bar/gas station/cafe run by one of Baker's ex-wives.

With a glint of pride, Baker relates how a water official allied with Mulroy expressed frustration at his continued lack of interest in a deal. "I thought you were just negotiating," the man told him. "I don't know what's wrong with you."

bettina.boxall@latimes.com

MORE NEWS

- 2 winning tickets sold in record lottery
- Fresh attacks kill at least 16 Iraqi pilgrims
- Wal-Mart fires worker for electronic spying
- Zell gains traction in bid for Tribune



What's the real beauty of "Southern California"? View our readers' photos and share your own at [Your Scene](#).

[Submit your photo now >>](#)