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Mormon church among protesters of Las Vegas water plan

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SALT LAKE CITY — Opponents of a controversial pipeline that would tap water from a shared Nevada/Utah aquifer and convey it to Las Vegas say more than 2,300 protests have been filed against the plan, including objections mounted by the Mormon church.

An analysis released Tuesday by the Great Basin Water Network shows the protests against the well applications sought by the Southern Nevada Water Authority represent 150 individuals and families, 16 ranches and seven tribes in areas that could be impacted by the pipeline.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints filed protests on four water right applications sought by the water authority that it contends may impact the Cleveland and Roger ranches it operates in north Spring Valley, just over the state line from Utah.

In protests filed April 22 before the close of the comment period, the church said its substantial subsurface water rights are critical to the operation of its livestock program because of irrigation needs. Vested water rights it holds on 12 springs are close to Cleve Creek and the Cleveland Ranch.

Those same protests were lodged by the church in 2006 because of similar concerns, which prompted it to ask that any permits be denied until groundwater studies could ensure it and other water-rights holders would not be damaged.

Other protests include those filed by the National Mustang Association, the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees, Scenic Nevada, the Indian Springs Civic Association and the Long Now Foundation.

The water authority wants to build a 285-mile pipeline to boost water supplies in Las Vegas and surrounding areas because of the long-term impacts of a prolonged drought, including a drop in Lake Mead levels.

With its own water appropriations from the Colorado River minuscule compared to those of other states in the region, like Utah or Colorado, the water authority has said it has been forced to look within its own basins to meet water needs in the future.

Multiple water rights applications in support of the pipeline were granted by the Nevada state engineer, but those applications in the eastern Nevada basins were tossed in a January court ruling. That decision forced the authority to resubmit its applications, which have drawn a new round of protests.

Sheep rancher Hank Vogler filed 100 protests himself, saying, "This to me is so important for the protection of eastern Nevada. This is the equivalent of an environmental holocaust."

Nine counties in three states, plus other local governments and government agencies and the state of Utah, also filed protests.

Utah filed a "statement of concern" against all nine well applications in Snake Valley. Bearing

the signature of Mike Styler, the Department of Natural Resources' executive director, the document references a draft agreement the two states were on the verge of signing until the judicial ruling put it on hold.

Styler said the state still stands by an agreement that provides for an allocation of groundwater that meets the interests of both Utah and Nevada and allows for environmental protections.

If the agreement is not put in place prior to any of the hearings on the water rights applications, Styler urged the Nevada engineer to consider the issues addressed in the water-sharing plan, including impacts to sensitive species and air quality in Utah.

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