

Environmentalists say Nevada water grab plan would threaten tiny chub fish

By Patty Henetz

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Environmental and tribal groups have filed a petition to list the minnow-like least chub as an endangered or threatened species, adding more pressure to the already intense Utah-Nevada fight over the effects of groundwater pumping in the Snake Valley.

In the petition filed Tuesday, the Center for Biological Diversity, Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Reservation, the Great Basin chapter of Trout Unlimited and the Utah chapter of the Sierra Club said the species' survival is threatened by the Southern Nevada Water Authority's plan to pump up to 200,000 acre feet of water each year from the arid valleys of eastern Nevada and western Utah to feed population growth in Las Vegas.

Snake Valley is northeast of Great Basin National Park on the Utah-Nevada line. The three least chub populations in the valley - half the populations remaining statewide - are doing fine now, Center for Biological Diversity biologist Allison Jones said Thursday. "But if we lose Snake Valley, the fish is in big trouble," she said.

Jones, who wrote the report that underlies the petition, relied on data gathered by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources to reach her conclusions. The federal Fish and Wildlife Service has a year to review the petition with the option of declaring the fish endangered or threatened.

Granting threatened or endangered status wouldn't by itself stop Nevada's plans, said Trout Unlimited spokesman Don Duff, a retired federal biologist. But Fish and Wildlife may have to provide a preservation plan, he said.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Geological Survey released a draft analysis showing aquifers beneath the west desert and eastern Nevada are more connected than previously believed, indicating that the water pipeline could impair farming and wildlife in Utah.

The USGS report also indicated there may be more groundwater in various aquifers than previously assumed, further complicating the claims and counterclaims surrounding the proposal.

The Nevada state engineer earlier this year authorized the Water Authority to pump 40,000 acre-feet annually from neighboring Spring Valley - whose aquifers are connected to Snake Valley's - and an additional 20,000 acre feet if officials decide the pumping hasn't unduly harmed the environment. Large-scale pumping would not occur for at least 10 years.

An acre-foot is typically the amount of water a family of four consumes in a year.

The Water Authority has yet to formally apply to pump groundwater out of Snake Valley. But ranchers there are convinced that even a drawdown in Spring Valley would ultimately destroy their land. Scientists and environmentalists say pumping the desert groundwater could affect around 20 plant and animal species already protected under the Endangered Species Act. Water Authority officials say they are aware of the environmental concerns and have pledged to

develop the water resource responsibly.

In 1997, Utah and the federal government agreed to try to keep the least chub off the endangered or threatened species list.

State biologists have unsuccessfully tried to transplant the least chub to other spring-fed habitats, Jones said.

Loss of the little fish statewide has come with population growth, irrigation, grazing and predation by the non-native mosquito fish, so if the least chub eventually die out, Nevada wouldn't be entirely to blame, she said. But if the Las Vegas pipeline is built, Snake Valley would lose the fish - and part of the state's heritage.

"What's good for the least chub is good for the farmer and rancher," Jones said.