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Slowing growth may delay or kill Lake Powell Pipeline

New numbers suggest growth is slowing, and that has some asking if there is really a need.

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New, much lower population forecasts for Washington County are raising questions about whether a planned \$1 billion pipeline to carry water from Lake Powell to St. George is truly needed, or should be delayed or even killed.

A 2008 state study figured the pipeline was needed based in part on projections that Washington County's 2040 population would grow to nearly 560,000 and outstrip all other water sources.

But new, preliminary projections — tweaked after the 2010 census and slowed growth from the “great recession” — now forecast the 2040 population at only 314,000, or 56 percent of the original.

The “data confirm what we already knew: the Lake Powell Pipeline is a boondoggle masquerading as a water project,” said Zach Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council. He says projections show the pipeline should be canceled.

Others say it is too early to make such a conclusion.

One reason is the new population projections from the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget are only preliminary. They have been sent to counties and others for comment and could change before they are finalized — which is expected sometime in the fall.

“We distributed those numbers looking for input about our model and assumptions from counties and local experts,” said state demographer Juliette Tennert. “We hope the final numbers will be used as a planning tool. But the numbers out there now are for input purposes only.”

She said projections are lower now because the recession slowed what had been skyrocketing growth in the St. George area. For example, projections used in 2008 forecast that the 2010 population in



Tribune file photo Preliminary population forecasts indicate far slower population growth in Washington Canyon than previously, raising questions about the pressing need for the \$1 billion Lake Powell pipeline project. In this file photo, large valves are opened at the base of the Glen Canyon Dam, sending water at a rate of 41,000 cubic feet per second into the Colorado River from Lake Powell.

Washington County would be 168,000. The census found instead that it was only about 139,000.

Eric Millis, deputy director of the Utah Division of Water Resources, said his agency will wait for final numbers before deciding whether to delay the project.

“Then we will look real hard at the need for the project,” he said. “We don’t want to build a project until it is needed. We don’t know if this could delay the need by five years, or 10 years or longer than that. We’re waiting to see what the final numbers say.”

Ron Thompson, general manager of the Washington County Water Conservancy District, notes that state projections usually low-ball population growth in his area, and his agency must plan for robust growth that often happened in the past despite predictions to the contrary.

He said that in 40 years, he’s only seen the state overestimate growth in Washington County once — this last time. “If the state projections had always been right, we’d only have about 40,000 people in Washington County today instead of 150,000,” he said.

“We’re not going to build a project that’s not needed. But with as long as it takes to put these projects together, you have to be planning for decades in the future,” Thompson said. “If it’s not needed today, it eventually will be.”

But Frankel said the new projections suggest the project was oversold in the past.

“If you walk into a bank and you inflate your income to borrow more money, that’s obviously loan fraud,” he said. He said water officials did that not only by using high population figures, but also by projecting per capita water use that is higher than regional averages.

“These water-demand figures are based on Washington County continuing to waste water for 50 years,” Frankel said. “Las Vegas’ water gluttony is spartan compared to St. George. Imagine the billions in Utah taxpayer dollars that could be saved if Washington County pursued conservation now, instead of three generations from now.”

The Legislature in 2006 authorized building the 139-mile pipeline, but funding and design are still in the works. At full development, it is envisioned to deliver up to 70,000 acre-feet of water a year — or enough to supply about 70,000 homes a year.

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