



August 8, 2008

Two Cents Worth: Ensign remains key; wilderness bill changes Ag & natural lake recession theories about lake levels

I still believe our junior U.S. Senator, John Ensign, is the key to our water and wilderness/public lands bill concerns.

The popular local image of Ensign is that he is afraid of the all-powerful Senator Harry Reid, and thus places himself on the Majority Speaker's side at every turn.

I disagree somewhat. It's not fear, it's politics. It's somewhat natural for junior to tag along with senior, to feel the lawmaker who has been there longer knows the ropes better; and one would hope that Congressional leaders from Nevada would try to work together for the betterment of our home state.

But that's where becoming a mirror image of Reid should stop. Ensign is a Republican after all, and should hopefully want to build his own legacy. He has shown himself to be an independent thinker on some other issues while standing firm with his party on still others. That's all part of the political game.

So, it's up to Nevadans--just like you and me--to leave absolutely no doubt where we stand on the issues that are important to us at home--in our particular local case, that's water, wilderness and lands bills right now.

The economy and the cost of fuel (undeniably intertwined) are not just national issues, but are concerns for all Nevadans as well--us included. But, this column centers on local issues, and thus we always turn to the Big 3.

One U.S. Senator (among 100 sent to Washington, D.C.) can make a huge difference. We need to call upon John Ensign to be the difference maker for us.

Regardless of what he might try to tell you, he can halt funding for Walker River water acquisitions. Ensign can make sure wilderness never resurfaces in any substantive way; and the same goes for any lands bill that might not be locally generated and supported.

One U.S. Senator (out of 100) in that house has that ability. Don't you believe otherwise. A Congressman/congresswoman would face much higher odds of failure as one of 435 representatives.

But, John Ensign can help us if he wants to.

Wilderness bills do change

Looking back, remember when we said we didn't trust the environmentalist groups sponsoring wilderness packages for Lyon and Mineral Counties and feared how Congress might change such proposals in Washington, D.C.?

We saw late changes come in both the White Pine and Lincoln County bills, and the Boxer/McKeon wilderness bill working its way through Congress for Inyo and Mono Counties in California is a perfect example, as it is changing already.

Following public hearings, the proposal was handed off to Congress proposing 430,000 acres of newly

designated wilderness in the Eastern Sierra. The acreage now stands at 438,000.

Proposed wilderness areas near Mammoth were subtracted from the list and new wilderness areas are now proposed to be added.

Congressman Buck McKeon's staff had announced the McGee Mountain Wilderness near Crowley Lake has been removed from the bill and the Laurel Lakes addition near Mammoth is no longer on the list, either.

Senator Barbara Boxer apparently wouldn't budge on the total acreage for wilderness in the bill, so other areas are being added as those parts are cut out of the bill.

So 4,000 acres on Table Mountain, between Aspendell and South Lake, is now proposed for wilderness, and other new additions include close to 4,000 acres on Mt. Conness near Tioga Pass and 500 acres near Tioga Lake.

In addition, the White Mountains, where much of the controversy in this bill lies, will create an additional 6,000 acres on top of 230,000 acres already in the bill. The recently added 6,000 acres are in Mono County and include an already protected area of Bristlecone Pine Forest.

Other changes in the bill include 22 miles of Cottonwood Creek in the White Mountains for Wild and Scenic River designation, and a wilderness boundary will now fall 75 feet from the center line of roads cherry stemmed into the wilderness--rather than the original 150 feet from center line. Every currently legal road will stay legal, reportedly.

A little Walker River chronology

The Walker River Basin encompasses an area of approximately 4,050 square miles (2,591,990 acres) and stretches in a generally northeasterly direction from the origins of its waters in the higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the southwest, beginning just north of Mono Lake, to the basin's terminus, Walker Lake, located on the basin's eastern edge.

Whew. That's quite a sentence (hailing from Walker River Chronology published in 1996), but it nails things down quite nicely when talking of our local water source.

Approximately 25% of the Walker River Basin lies within California (about 1,002 square miles or 641,280 acres), but that portion of the basin accounts for the vast majority of the precipitation and constitutes the primary source of the basin's surface water flows. The Nevada portion of the basin is located in west-central Nevada and encompasses approximately 3,048 square miles (1,949,440 acres) and accounts for just over 75% of the basin's total area.

The basin is drained by the Walker River system, consisting of the West Walker (the larger of the two) and the East Walker in the upper part of the basin. These two forks then join in Mason Valley about seven miles upstream from the City of Yerington, forming the mainstem of the Walker River, which ultimately discharges into Walker Lake, a terminal (without outflow) desert lake located some 160 miles from the river's headwaters.

The vast majority of consumptive use within the basin (including irrigation, evapotranspiration and evaporation) from surface waters, particularly Walker Lake, takes place within Nevada. A 1969 estimate placed withdrawals for irrigation in the Nevada portion of the basin alone at more than 90% of this portion of the basin's consumptive water use.

"While admittedly dated, this figure still depicts the relative importance of agricultural water use in the Walker River Basin," reads the report. And that's exactly what we've been trying to tell Harry Reid.

Walker Lake represents one of only two remaining major remnants of ancient Lake Lahontan, an Ice Age lake which covered much of northwestern Nevada as recently as 12,500 years ago. It was approximately 13 miles long, just over five miles wide, about 90 feet deep, and contains just over 2-million acre feet of water, the 1996 report represented back then.

The report goes into detail about the lake's relatively poor water quality, adding: "While the cause of Walker Lake's present water deficit may appear obvious, the possible solutions (including curtailment of agricultural diversions) are far more complex and may involve considerable economic loss."

No kidding. Please Harry, don't destroy one resource in an attempt to save another.

Natural lake recession?

"Furthermore, while strong arguments exist of the lake's restoration and preservation on recreation and environmental grounds, it is not certain whether the reduction in Walker Lake is due entirely to upstream agriculture diversions, as some now argue, or whether Walker Lake's recession over the last hundred years or so is part of an inevitable hydrologic cycle which has been admittedly accelerated by upstream agricultural diversions," the report says.

Two specific reports attribute the declines in the lake's volume specifically to agriculture and "other human intervention," but precipitation data compiled by the Nevada State Climatologist tend to show that over the last 100 years, "precipitation levels in northern Nevada appear to have been declining, thereby supporting a theory of a natural lake recession."

The current climatic conditions represent "only one area of uncertainty with respect to finding long-term solutions to insuring Walker Lake's survival as a viable fishery".

"Realistically, the future of Walker Lake will probably never be resolved to the complete satisfaction of all interested parties."

Not surprising. We're at that stage today.

The report goes on to say that hopefully, resources will not be expended needlessly, and that "adverse impacts, both economic and environmental, are mitigated to every extent possible"

The report lists five primary Walker River Basin issues:

- (1) The decline in Walker Lake's level, volume and water quality;
- (2) Preservation of a viable agricultural industry;
- (3) Walker River Paiute Indian Reservation water claims;
- (4) Recreational water use; and
- (5) Interstate water allocation.

Nothing there appears to have changed since 1996.

Walker River Chronology predicted controversy would continue to surround "the river's water used for irrigation purposes."

Still the case today.

Agriculture is criticized for its water use, but less well-known and recognized is the fact that waters diverted to ag in Mason and Smith Valleys have made important contributions toward habitat creation and preservation in these areas.

"Only time will tell if a lasting solution can be reached whereby environmental, habitat, recreation, native American, and agricultural interests can co-exist and share the limited waters of the Walker River Basin."

So reads this report from 12 years ago, and we're still fighting the battle.

Who did this report?

"» The Nevada Division of Water Planning, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources when Pete Morros was director of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

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