

DOE Outlines Water Needs for Yucca Mountain Railroad

By Dave Maxwell, Staff Writer

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Congresswoman Shelley Berkley (D-NV) has blasted the continued proposal by the Department of Energy (DOE) to build a \$3 billion dollar railroad in Nevada from Caliente to the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Repository. She labeled the project as a “Railroad to Nowhere” at a meeting December 4 in Las Vegas with federal regulators from the Surface Transportation Board.

However, at the Lincoln County Water District meeting in Alamo December 18, DOE representatives made a presentation of what the water requirements are to be for building such a railroad. Mark Vandenberg of the DOE Office of Logistics Management explained to Board members what construction of the proposed railroad, covering more than 360 miles would really involve. He stated approximately 333 miles of new rail line would have to be laid. There would be three rock quarries, one in Caliente, one in the middle of the line, and a third near Goldfield in Esmeralda County. There would also be a need for up to 12 construction camps along the route. DOE has applied to the Surface Transportation Board for permission to construct and operate the rail line as a shared line, allowing commercial traffic and other shippers to use the line as well.

Vandenberg said construction would probably not be ready to begin until the year 2013 and take between 4 to 10 years to complete. During that time a total of about 6,000 acre-feet of water would be required. One-acre foot is equal to 325,851 gallons. Most of the water would be needed during the first two years of construction for embankment compaction, he said. Other water needed during the remaining 2-8 years of construction would be for dust control, field operations, and construction camps. About 22 acre-feet of water annually (7,168,722 gallons) is needed for the operation and maintenance along the route. There will be maintenance and wildfire suppression tanks at 12 sidings on the route with permanent facilities to be located in Caliente, Meadow Valley, Goldfield and Yucca Mountain.

The final rail alignment Environmental Impact Statement, released last June, describes the water requirements associated with the railroad. To obtain the needed water, DOE intends to file applications with the State Water Engineer for up to 103 wells (mostly temporary) along the route, although some of it may come from existing municipal or DOE sources. They also intend to file for long-term water appropriations at sidings and facilities with sixteen of the new wells to be located in the Panaca Valley and 11 more in Pahroc Valley. Water Board member Ronda Hornbeck said there are a good number of other water applications already in existence for many of the same places DOE is interested in, "So you're at the back of the line."

Vandeberg said after the construction phase, DOE does not plan to retain the water rights on the wells. Some might be sold to other interested parties, but most will simply be closed over and abandoned. In addition, he noted, "There has been some interest from the U.S.G.S. and others, so they could use them as monitoring water quality."

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