

Watering the lake

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This is one of those good news, bad news stories.

The good news is that Kennecott Utah Copper Corp. and the Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District are working out a plan to clean up groundwater in southwest Salt Lake County that was polluted over the last century by mining. This project should stop the spread of polluted underground water and provide a source of purified drinking water for the southwest Salt Lake Valley.

The bad news is that current plans call for some of the pollutants removed from the groundwater to be discharged into the Jordan River. This could endanger wildlife in the river and in the freshwater marshes on the Great Salt Lake that the river supplies.

There is room for disagreement about whether the discharges will meet current water quality standards and whether, over time, they will pose a toxic threat to birds and other wildlife. But we would urge environmental regulators to exercise caution and require Kennecott and the district to adopt the most conservative plan to protect the Jordan and Great Salt Lake marshes.

This might require Kennecott to impound all of the discharges on its property. That would increase the cost of the project, but that would be worthwhile if it is necessary to protect wildlife habitat. It would be folly to clean up one source of pollution and in the process create another.

The project is being designed to remove sulfates and metals from an underground aquifer in the southwest valley. The plume of polluted water has been divided into two zones, each of which will be equipped with a treatment plant. Kennecott will operate the westerly plan, and the water district will operate the one to the east. Wells will extract the water, and a reverse osmosis process will be used to remove the contaminants.

The discharge of contaminants from the Kennecott plant will be fed into the company's slurry pipeline for disposal in its tailings ponds. As now proposed, the discharge from the district's plant will go into the Jordan.

In comments on the permit for the plan, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service expressed concern about the levels of total dissolved solids and selenium that would be released into the river during low-flow conditions. The service has recommended those permitted levels be reduced. State water officials believe the project will meet current standards.

The wildlife service is particularly worried about selenium accumulating in the lake's wetlands. Selenium is an essential trace element for waterfowl, but it is toxic in large amounts, causing deformities in embryos.

The water district is studying ways to remove metals and selenium from the discharge. If that does not prove feasible, Kennecott could be required to accept all of the discharge.

Either way, the Jordan and the lake wetlands should be protected. The Great Salt Lake is one of the premier bird habitats in North America and should be treated accordingly.