

Workman slams water plan

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The much-touted plan to clean up Kennecott-contaminated groundwater in south Salt Lake County has hit another sandbar.

County Mayor Nancy Workman on Monday announced she is officially opposed to the plan, which would pump the water from the ground, treat it and dump the filtered contaminants into the Jordan River.

"I fear that the Jordan River is being considered as the first option for waste disposal," Workman said. "It should be the last option. . . . It's not much of a cleanup plan when you reduce the water quality of the largest river in the Salt Lake Valley."

The plan -- crafted by the state Department of Environmental Quality and Kennecott Utah Copper Corp. -- was announced in September and highlighted by former Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt as a prime example of his "en libra" philosophy for resolving environmental conflict.

But as word of the cleanup plan spread through the community, so did the conflict.

Workman's opposition follows similar complaints lodged by environmental groups, the Salt Lake City Public Utilities Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, two Utah legislators, the United Steelworkers of America and assorted duck clubs, property owners and farmers in the Jordan River delta.

The complaints have, in part, prompted the Utah Division of Water Quality to rethink a pollution discharge permit it issued earlier this year to the Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District.

Jordan Valley is assisting the state and Kennecott in the cleanup plan, which calls for pumping an aquifer beneath South Jordan that was contaminated by unlined evaporation ponds Kennecott operated half a century ago.

The groundwater, tainted with salts and selenium, would be filtered through a reverse-osmosis plant to be built at 8100 S. 1300 West. The clean water would be piped into Jordan Valley's culinary system, while the contaminants would be piped to a point near 2100 South and discharged into the Jordan River.

In issuing a discharge permit to Jordan Valley, state water-quality officials said the pollutants would be below federal standards for rivers.

But Salt Lake City is worried the additional pollutants may lead to stricter controls on storm water the city discharges into the river.

Environmentalists, federal biologists and duck hunters worry the discharges will harm the wetlands.

Ostler said he believes meeting the federal standards in the river will protect the wetlands, but last week the division took readings on land owned by one of the duck clubs showing selenium levels at 4.5 parts per billion, a fraction below the new federal standard of 4.6.

Additional loads of selenium from the groundwater cleanup plan could increase the concentrations of the dangerous metal in the wetlands, threatening a Great Salt Lake ecosystem that is part of an internationally important flyway for migratory birds.

Ostler said the state Water Quality Board likely will revisit the discharge permit to make it reflect the new federal standard for selenium as well as some technical changes in Jordan Valley's proposed operation of the reverse-osmosis plant.

He wasn't sure whether the revised permit would require monitoring.

Regardless, he said his division will continue to collect baseline selenium data and monitor selenium levels through the discharge permit's five-year lifetime.

"The bottom line is, we just don't have good information on how the hydraulics operate [in the wetlands] or on the quality of the duck clubs themselves," Ostler said.

"We need to collect data so that no one has to make assumptions."

In addition to persuading Ostler's division to rework the discharge permit, opponents of the cleanup plan are hoping to persuade Dianne Nielson, director of the Department of Environmental Quality, to require an alternative to dumping pollutants into the river.

"I want Jordan Valley Water -- or any other potential polluter -- to simply look at other options than the Jordan River when it comes to dumping garbage," Workman said Monday.

As trustee for a \$37 million natural resource damage claim settlement the state reached with Kennecott in 1995, Nielson still must approve the cleanup plan.