

Deseret News

Solar pond expansion on Great Salt Lake sparks flood of comments

By Amy Joi O'Donoghue

Published: Thursday, July 9, 2009 10:57 p.m. MDT

Comments for and against a proposed expansion of solar evaporation ponds on the northwestern shores of the Great Salt Lake are flooding the offices of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is tasked with issuing or denying a permit for the project.

Great Salt Lake Minerals Corp. is seeking to expand, over time, its operation of solar evaporation ponds by up to 91,000 acres to boost its production of sulfate of potash speciality fertilizer.

The proposed expansion comes after the state agreed to the lease of additional acres in exchange for GSL giving up undeveloped leases for 30,000 acres around Promontory Point.

First, however, the environmental impacts of such a proposal have to be weighed by the federal agency. The initial 45-day comment period that also featured multiple public hearings ended Thursday, but comments are still being accepted.

"They are rolling in as we speak," said Jason Gipson, the corps chief of the Utah/Nevada regulatory branch. "The last couple of days we have been flooded with them."

Gipson said the comments will prove invaluable in the agency's environmental review of the proposed expansion and will be used to magnify its own analysis of potential impacts to the Great Salt Lake. The draft report is expected to be finalized in February, kicking off a new round of comments and meetings.

"A lot of alternatives and issues come from these comments, bringing up information on issues that we were not aware of," he said.

For that reason, Gipson said comments that come in over the course of the next several days will not be ignored.

"We are not going to dismiss anything," he added.

The rush of comments has been split about evenly, Gipson said, with half from people who are adamantly opposed to the expansion and the other half in favor. A letter-writing campaign generated about 1,200 postcards from people in support, he added.

Areas of the proposed expansion are within the state's Great Salt Lake's comprehensive management plan, which identifies those locations that are suitable for mineral extraction or other uses.

Critics, however, say the new ponds will jeopardize wildlife habitat, especially birds, and may irreparably damage the Great Salt Lake in general.

GSL has said the expansion of the ponds is almost exclusively on the lake's most desolate area where there are no fish, marshes, brine shrimp or bugs.

"New ponds in this area would have zero effect on the millions of birds that flock to the eastern and southern parts of the lake," said spokesman Dave Hyams. "The only birds on the west side are pelicans who nest on Gunnison Island; GSL's nearest pond would be a full three miles from Gunnison to ensure the sanctity of the nesting areas."

Comments may be mailed to Gipson, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 533 W. 2600 South, Suite 150, Bountiful, UT 84010 or e-mail jason.a.gipson@usace.army.mil