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Water rights approved for proposed Utah nuke plant

(AP) SALT LAKE CITY — The developer of a proposed nuclear power plant in eastern Utah has been given the rights to use about 17.5 billion gallons of water a year from the Green River despite safety and oversight concerns raised by conservationists.

Overall, the application from Blue Castle Holdings for the water rights has met all of the legal requirements because it will not interfere with existing water rights and water is available, State Engineer Kent Jones said in a report issued Friday.

The approval means the proposed plant, which would be built near the town of Green River, has received all of the necessary permits at the state level. But the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission still needs to sign off on the plant's construction, and a decision is not expected from the federal authorities for years.

The approved water usage amounts to 53,600 acre-feet of water a year from the Green River, a major tributary of the Colorado River. That's enough to serve about 100,000 households.

Opponents of the project immediately decried the decision, and cautioned it would pose serious threats to endangered fish, use a significant amount of already scarce water and damage the recreational opportunities in the region.

"Adding this massive water withdrawal atop climate change and regional drying will result in severe impairment of the rivers' abilities to sustain their part of Utah's natural heritage," said Rob Mrowka, an ecologist and conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Jones acknowledged those concerns, but said state law was clear on the requirements for approval. But he did emphasize that the approval doesn't guarantee water will always be available for the plant to use.

"We have listened to and very much appreciate the concerns raised by those in the local community and others," Jones said in a statement. "Those concerns helped us look carefully and critically at the proposal as we considered the appropriate action on these applications."

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