

**Notice of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's
Adoption of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's Environmental
Assessment, dated August 28, 2006,
for the Town of Searchlight Exploratory Wells Project;
and
Notice of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's
Proposed Finding of No Significant Impact
for
The Town of Searchlight Exploratory Wells Project**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has awarded \$394,900 of federal grant funds to the Las Vegas Valley Water District (LVVWD) for the drilling of six exploratory groundwater wells. Continuation of the EPA grant to the LVVWD is dependant on compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 USC 43121-4370f.

The town of Searchlight, Nevada, is located in the Mojave Desert, approximately 60 miles south southwest of Las Vegas, Nevada, in Piute Valley. The town relies exclusively on groundwater located in an alluvial aquifer west of town as its potable water source. The Las Vegas Valley Water District (LVVWD) has operated the Searchlight Water System since 1988. Water is supplied to the town by two groundwater wells in Piute Valley: Well S-1 and Well S-2.

Well S-1 is located approximately 0.5 miles west of U.S. Highway 95 (US-95) and about 1.5 miles north of the town center. It was drilled and became operational in 1983 for use as the primary water supply for Searchlight. However, as demands on the system increase, the ability of the aquifer to respond to pumping rates and continue to provide water through Well S-1 diminished. As an emergency measure to ensure an adequate water supply would be available, Well S-2 was drilled in 1990 and became operational in 1992. Well S-2, now the primary supply well, is located approximately 4 miles west of Searchlight and 1.5 miles south of Nevada State Route 164 (SR-164). Well S-1 is now an emergency backup well, with limited resource and pumping capacity.

The groundwater level and production rate at Well S-2 have steadily declined since it was drilled, and the well is currently approaching its production capacity limit with regard to meeting Searchlight's water consumption demands. This production capacity limit is a factor of both the well's pumping rate and the ability of the aquifer to respond.

Additionally, the water supply for Searchlight also needs to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act's Revised Arsenic Rule that went into effect January 23, 2006. Under this rule, the EPA lowered the standard for the maximum contamination level of arsenic in community water supply systems from 0.05 mg/L (milligrams per Liter) to a standard of 0.01 mg/L. The current average arsenic concentration level in the Searchlight water system is 0.012 mg/L, which does not meet the new standard.

In order to obtain data on the quality and quantity of groundwater in Piute Valley, groundwater exploratory wells need to be drilled, and the aquifer tested for water quality and production capability. A specific water supply project for the town of Searchlight cannot be developed until

such hydrological information, which currently does not exist, is collected. Only after this information is collected, can a determination be made as to whether future groundwater production wells in Piute Valley could supply Searchlight with additional water that could also be used to dilute and thus lower arsenic concentrations in the existing supply. The EPA funds are specifically for the exploratory phase of the wells project.

The project required a right-of-way grant from the BLM to use approximately 11 miles of existing access roads and encumber approximately 6.074 acres at the six exploratory well sites. Pursuant to NEPA, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) completed a review of the Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared by the SWCA Environmental Consultants for the proponent Las Vegas Valley Water District, dated August 28, 2006. After consideration of the environmental effects as described in the EA, the BLM determined that with mitigation measures described in the Biological Opinion issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on September 29, 2006, the proposed action would not significantly affect the quality of the human health and environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement was not required. Therefore, the BLM issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on December 7, 2006.

The EPA, Region 9, has reviewed the BLM's EA and concurs with the BLM's FONSI. The EPA concludes that there are no significant impacts associated with the EPA-funded project: Searchlight Exploratory Groundwater Wells Project. The EPA therefore, adopts the BLM's EA for the Searchlight Exploratory Groundwater Wells Project.

Public Review

The EPA is issuing this draft FONSI for the Searchlight Exploratory Groundwater Wells Project. The EPA is inviting comments specifically on EPA's adoption of the BLM EA and on the EPA's proposed FONSI. Those wishing to view the BLM EA that EPA proposes to adopt may do so on EPA's website at <http://www.epa.gov/region09/nepa/epa-generated.html>. The EA and FONSI are also available for public inspection at the EPA Region 9, office at 75 Hawthorne Street, San Francisco, CA. To make an appointment to review the EA at this office or to obtain additional information about the project, please contact Marvin Young at (415) 972-3561 or young.marvin@epa.gov.

All comments should be sent to the EPA as this is a proposed EPA action. The EPA must receive comments by **February 22, 2007**; which provides a minimum of 30 calendar days from the date of posting. The EPA will take no administrative action on the EPA-funded project described above prior to expiration of this comment period and review and response to any comments received.

Comments should be mailed to:

Marvin Young
U. S. EPA, Region 9
75 Hawthorne Street (WTR-6)
San Francisco, CA, 94105

Or faxed to Mr. Young at (415) 947-3549

The EPA will review, consider and respond to all comments received for the FONSI. If this FONSI is signed by the Regional Administrator, it will not be re-circulated for review, but will be available to any individual upon request.

Wayne Natri
EPA, Regional Administrator

Date