

August 31, 2009



Snake Valley Agreement  
c/o Utah Department of Natural Resources  
Division of Water Rights  
1594 West North Temple, Suite 220  
Salt Lake City, UT 84114

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to express my concerns about the draft Agreement for Management of the Snake Valley Groundwater System. My concerns stem from my long involvement with the region and its people. I spent over five years photographically documenting the West Desert area of Utah and eastern Nevada and interviewing the people who live there. That work became an exhibit at the Utah Museum of Natural History and a book, *People of the West Desert*, published by Utah State University Press.

I'd like to offer a perspective that you might not have heard yet based on my experience.

One of the things I came to know over the five years I worked on this project is to trust the residents of Snake Valley in what they know of the land. Living and working on the land for decades has given Snake Valley denizens a unique insight. I offer the MX Missile history as example.

Originally, residents of Snake Valley supported the idea of a missile system that would be a deterrent to Soviet nuclear threats. But when they learned that the missile was to be sited in Utah's West Desert and move on railroad tracks through desert valleys and into tunnels carved into mountainsides, they became alarmed. Even though they were told by Department of Defense experts that the engineering had been researched and tested and that it would work, Snake Valley folks knew otherwise. They were intimately involved with the land. They understood its soils because they had tried to grow grains and alfalfa for years with only marginal success. Eventually, they were able to coax life from the soil, but it was only by trial and error. So, once they realized that the Department of Defense didn't have its facts, they turned against the MX siting proposal. Not because they weren't patriotic, but because their experience told them the scheme couldn't work as promoted. The soils wouldn't allow it. That knowledge, now, is invaluable.

The lesson here for Snake Valley Aquifer management is that the state should listen quite carefully to the residents of Snake Valley and trust their observations and judgments, especially at a time when neither Utah nor Nevada has all the necessary information. Until hydrological and soils research is finished, the state should be erring on the side of landed experience.

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If people of Snake Valley say there isn't enough water, that springs already are drying up and that taking the amount of water out of the aquifer that is being proposed in the agreement will lead to desertification, I believe them. Don't assume that they are simply trying to protect their livelihoods. Take their pleas to heart and slow down this process until all the data are in, even slower than proposed in the draft agreement. I suspect that once the data are in, Snake Valley residents will be vindicated. I just don't want it to be too late. Once the pipeline is started and Las Vegas develops around that water, no amount of trigger shut-offs will ever stop the process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Craig Denton".

Craig Denton  
Professor of Communication

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