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# Counties cooperate in effort to ensure continued operation of power plant

By RICHARD SHAW  
Staff reporter

In an unusual action, three local counties decided to make a decision that will provide water to the Huntington Canyon power plant until the drought plaguing the area concludes.

Last week, an agreement was hammered out specifying that the water from Skyline mine will be pumped to Electric Lake to keep the storage reservoir's level to the point where the power plant can operate.

If the agreement had not been reached, the power plant would have had to close in June because of the inability to generate steam and between 300 to 400 workers would have lost jobs at the plant as well as Deer Creek coal mine.

The counties agreeing to the temporary fix were Carbon, Emery and Sanpete.

"It is truly historical," com-

mented Carbon County Commissioner Mike Milovich on Friday afternoon. "We are lucky that we have very level headed county officials in all three entities."

The history of water conflict in the area is legendary, particularly between Sanpete and Carbon counties.

The conflict relates to the Gooseberry project which was going to be built to divert water from the Carbon County drainage area to Sanpete County. Due to various actions and court decisions, the project has never been constructed.

Two years ago, a new egg was thrown into the mix. It began at Canyon Fuel's Skyline operation when coal miners ran into a water pocket while removing the black resource about 800 feet below Electric Lake. Within several days, the section was flooded and the company began searching for ways to handle the problem.

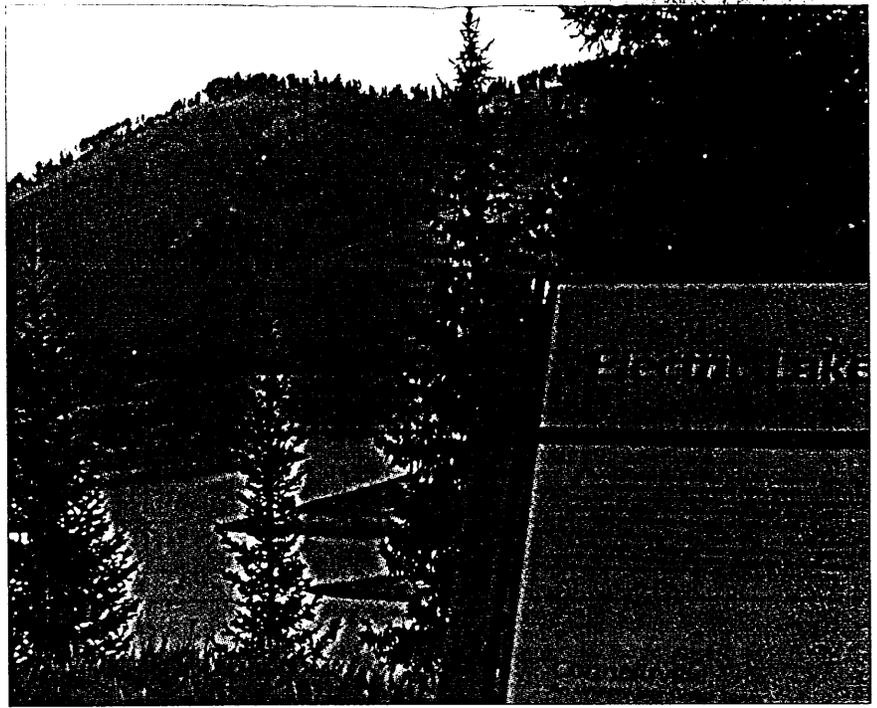
The mine was closed for a few weeks because of the water. But eventually, the company was able to place large pumps in the mine and drill a well from the surface in James Canyon.

When pumping started, it was estimated by the company between 8,000 and 11,000 gallons of water per minute were being removed from the mine.

The water level in the section finally dropped enough for coal removal operations to restart, but the problem persists in the original location and a second area where the company intends to move operations in the future.

At about the same time the Skyline incident occurred, engineers from Utah Power discovered that Electric Lake was losing water at a rapid pace. The situation resulted in public speculations that the water in the Skyline mine was draining out of

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Electric Lake was very low last summer due to the drought and the water loss that was recently determined to be 4000 gallons per minute through a fissure on the lake bottom. A

new agreement between the counties involved has allowed Utah Power to take over the pumping of water out of Skyline Mine which will bring replacement water to the reservoir.

## Counties ensure continued operation of power plant

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the manmade reservoir built to supply the Huntington power plant.

But according to preliminary carbon dating tests, the water could not have been on the surface of the earth for 6,000 to 12,000 years. The tests measured tritium, a trace isotope of hydrogen which is produced by hydrogen bomb tests.

The trace element shows up in all water that has been on the surface of the earth for less than 60 years.

The pumping continued with most of the water flowing into Muddy Creek and ultimately into Scofield Reservoir.

But in December 2001, state and federal agencies concerned with the integrity of the stream and it's banks, told the mine they had to find another way to pump at least some of the water into another stream because of the degradation of Muddy Creeks stream beds.

The mine cut back the pumping into the Scofield tributary and sent some of the water over into the Electric Lake drainage to cut down the northbound flow.

Ultimately, Muddy Creek began receiving 8,000 gallons per minute on a regular basis.

According to some sources, the water from the mine helped a great deal to avert a dire dry season last summer as the drought the area is locked in persisted for a third year. At 8,000 gallons per minute, the mine water became almost a third of the flow that came into Scofield last year, boosting the starting level in the spring considerably.

The waters source however, remained a mystery and the cost of pumping it was costing the mine a great deal of money.

Some local experts speculated, based on geography and formations that there probably was an underground aquifer that lay largely under Carbon and Sanpete counties with a small portion of it in Emery county.

However, a definitive study was said to be needed to determine that. And despite the tests for trace radiation results, rumors still persisted that the water was coming out of Electric Lake.

Last fall, the three counties received a grant for over a half million dollars to do a study on the situation. However, some differences emerged about how to do the study and it has not yet been started.

Recently, it was determined that Electric Lake is losing about 4,000 gallons per minute into a fissure at the bottom of the reservoir. That coupled with the extreme four year drought, which now looks as if it will extend through this year too, brought about the recent action by the two counties.

However, there are some limits to the resource, besides how much nature will provide from the ground.

"The pumping is being taken over by Utah Power and Light," stated Milovich. "They are going to be allowed 4,000 gallons per minute to get them through the year. However, there will be no claim to the rights to the water within this action. Scofield will still get between 4,000-5,000 gallons per minute."

The economics of the whole thing also aids the mine. The company was going to have to shut down pumping that section of the operation eventually, largely because of the cost of bringing it top side.

That cost is reportedly two cents per gallon, based on the expense of operating the pumps.

"As a county at this time, we couldn't afford to pump that water out and have it be viable for our use," stated Milovich.

But more importantly for the mine, not only wouldn't the water be coming out of the operation to add to the areas water supply, having to shut down the pumps would also affect the life span of the mine.

With the water pumped out, officials estimate that there is enough coal to keep the mine open for up to 13 more years. Without the pumping, it's life expectancy would drop to seven or eight years.