



Research group seeks money to continue cloud seeding in Nevada

By Jeff DeLong • jdelong@rgj.com • May 9, 2010

Nevada's cloud-seeding program, almost killed by the state budget crisis, produced nearly 13 billion gallons of extra water over six months ending in late April, experts said.

"That's nothing to sneeze at," said Sparks Councilman Mike Carrigan, who chairs two water commissions that voted to provide money to keep the cloud-seeding program alive last winter.

Now officials at the Desert Research Institute hope to convince providers the program squeezes enough extra moisture out of winter storms to justify the expense of about \$1 million per year.

The cloud-seeding program was in big trouble after the 2009 Legislature, facing a record budget deficit, dropped state funding for DRI's efforts. Last summer, DRI went so far as to dismantle its five cloud-seeding generators in the Lake Tahoe area.

An 11th-hour pitch to state water providers raised nearly \$600,000 to keep it running.

Contributors included the Truckee Meadows Water Authority, the Western Regional Water Commission, the Southern Nevada Water Authority and the Walker River Irrigation District.

The money allowed DRI to continue operating generators at Tahoe, the mountains draining into the Walker River and the Ruby and Tuscarora mountains in northeast Nevada.

Mountaintop generators release silver iodide particles into clouds, boosting snowfall amounts. Silver iodide can also be released by aircraft, but none were used in the Nevada program last winter.

Tahoe generators, reassembled in the nick of time, were operated during 56 storm events between late October and late April, sometimes for just a few hours and sometimes for up to a day, said Arlen Huggins, the scientist who heads DRI's cloud-seeding program.

Experts estimate the process can extract between 5 percent and 15 percent more snow from storms. In the three regions of Nevada that were seeded last winter, Huggins estimates additional snowfall produced about 39,000 acre-feet, or 12.7 billion gallons, of extra water.

"From the results I've seen, this makes an actual, observable percentage change in your snowpack. It makes a difference," Huggins said.

DRI is now in the process of forming an advisory committee to meet during summer to discuss needs and potential funding sources to continue the program.

Huggins said the panel will be composed of "just about anybody that has a vested interest in water."

Carrigan, who chairs the Truckee Meadows Water Authority and Western Regional Water Commission, said he will be interested in hearing the committee's recommendations. The two panels contributed more than \$200,000 to keep last season's program going.

The water agencies likely will pay again, Carrigan said.

"I'm sure we can squeeze out some more money but I'm not sure how much," Carrigan said. "We can't afford a million dollars."

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