

Senators give the BLM People what they want.

Senators have eyes on public lands near Vegas

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LAS VEGAS (AP)— Sens. Harry Reid and John Ensign are developing a long-term strategy for using southern Nevada's vast public lands to accommodate the area's rapid growth that someday might see development stretch from the Strip to the California state line.

Using the scenic peaks of the Red Rock Conservation Area as a backdrop, the two on Thursday announced a bipartisan effort to ensure Las Vegas area residents have the infrastructure, recreational and conservation opportunities they need well into the future.

Clark County is home to Las Vegas, the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the nation, and to thousands of acres of public land, of which the federal government retains control over more than three of every four acres.

The idea for a Clark County Public Lands bill is in response to dozens of public lands requests the senators have received this year.

The legislation, which is still to be drafted, plans for development associated with the new Ivanpah Valley Airport about 30 miles south of Las Vegas and the Interstate 15 corridor to the California state line, Reid said.

It also would address infrastructure — including water and power — needed to service the rapid growth in Las Vegas and other parts of the West.

"The energy crisis in California is not just their crisis, it's ours," Reid said, referring to the need for more power plants and transmission lines in Nevada. "We have to become self-sufficient."

The Southern Nevada Water Authority also will need a way to deliver water to the growing I-15 corridor, Reid said.

"But we also have to protect our fragile ecosystem," he said.

The proposed bill would review the various wilderness study areas in Clark County.

The idea is in its initial phases. The senators are asking for public comments as they continue to write the legislation, which Reid said should be introduced before the end of the current congressional session.

The proposed land-use legislation would be the third piece of federal law passed in the past four years.

In 1998, the original Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act, authored by Ensign, provided for the auctioning of 27,000 acres in the Las Vegas Valley for private development, with money going to environmental projects and other public uses.

"The only way to get something like this done is working together," Ensign said. "We recognize the incredible challenge ahead of us."

While not everyone — environmentalists, developers, local government — will come away with everything they want, Ensign said they can find a balanced compromise that will serve as a model for the rest of the nation.

Last year, another land use bill passed that requires the Bureau of Land Management to sell 6,500 acres to the Clark County Department of Aviation for a secondary facility in Ivanpah Valley. Airport planners expect to buy the land for \$13 million in about a year, with the airport set to open around 2010.