Great Salt Lake Minerals reduces water request
Last updated
Thursday, November 11, 2010 - 10:23pm

CHARLES F. TRENTELMAN/Standard-Examiner
OGDEN -- Great Salt Lake Minerals said Thursday it is cutting by more than half the amount of additional water it will request to take from Great Salt Lake in the future to produce potassium sulfate and other chemicals.

The reduction from 353,000 acre-feet per year to 150,000 is possible because of technology that will let GSL increase the efficiency of its existing evaporation ponds by 60 percent, said Dave Hyams, GSL spokesman.

"You whack the water request by 50 percent, which we feel should address the concerns of the project foes," Hyams said Thursday.

If the idea was meant to appease Friends of Great Salt Lake, an environmental organization that represents most people and agencies working to preserve the lake, it didn't work.

"So they're going to double their production in the next five years," said Lynn de Freitas, director of FOGSL.

If GSL can be so efficient with the water it has now, she said, why does it need more?

"They're going to reduce the water they need with these improvements. When do you say, isn't that enough? What about the fact that there are other lake users that are feeling the pinch, like the yacht club? They're out there pulling the boats out of the mud."

GSL earlier this year announced it was going to implement new technology to make its dikes less permeable to lake water.

GSL mines potassium sulfate, used as a fertilizer, from Great Salt Lake by putting lake water in giant ponds and letting the water evaporate out. If less water escapes, more is evaporated and more minerals are recovered.

The lake water has large quantities of salt, potassium sulfate and magnesium chloride dissolved in it. As the water evaporates, the salt crystallizes out first, then the potassium sulfate, which is used as a fertilizer, and finally the magnesium.

Because of increased demand for its products, GSL has asked Utah and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for approval to add 91,000 acres of new ponds and to use 353,000 acre-feet more water for its process.

It is that second request, for water, that is being cut by more than half.

Hyams said the company also is discussing with the Corps of Engineers changing the request to a more phased-in system stretching out over decades.

GSL met with officials from the Corps of Engineers on Wednesday to discuss the productivity improvements and what impact they will have on the company's request for use of lake water and dike area, Hyams said.

Construction of the dike improvements is already getting started, but the Corps of Engineers has not yet approved the company's expansion of its dike system.

Environmental groups led by FOGSL are opposing that expansion in court.

Because of increased productivity, Hyams said, GSL would probably not need any additional water for the first phase, which would add 23,000 acres of new ponds.

Hyams said GSL is seeking a patent on its system for making its dikes more impermeable to water. He said it is a process similar to one the Bureau of Reclamation used to repair the Arthur V. Watkins Dam around Willard Bay last year.

That work, to repair a leak under the dam, involved digging a trench through the top of the dam down into the lake bed and filling the trench with a cement slurry that would partially harden, sealing the dam.

Even with the added efficiency, Hyams said, GSL still needs to expand its pond system by 91,000 acres, most of which would be in the lake's northwest arm.

That expansion would take place over decades, he said.

"We're maxed out now, and even the greater efficiency will be a bridge to where we get the new ponds," he said. "In tons, we're talking about demand rising -- we're trying to triple things over the next 40 years."

He said demand is rising so quickly that the first new ponds will need to be producing by about 2017 even with the increased efficiency. It takes three years after they are built for ponds to produce finished product.

De Freitas questions whether GSL really needs more ponds with the increased efficiency.

She said she understands GSL now uses only half the water it is allowed, and "what they are essentially doing with this increased efficiency, as I understand it, is they're going to be able to double the capacity of their potassium sulfate in the next five years, and if you look at the market demand by 2019, that they're going to have so much product that it's more than market demands."

That's without any pond expansion, she said, so why does GSL still need more?

Hyams said the company projections of demand are more than de Freitas is looking at and go well beyond 2019.

"This is a company that plans in decades," he said. "We're in it for the long haul, as are the farmers."