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Utah company to cut water use for solar ponds

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Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) - A Utah company seeking government approval to boost production of fertilizer from Great Salt Lake said Thursday it can cut by more than half the amount of lake water it originally planned to take for the expansion.

Great Salt Lake Minerals Corp. said it hopes the concession speeds up government approvals and satisfies environmental critics. The company wants to triple production of organic potash, the specialty plant fertilizer, by adding 117 square miles of solar evaporation ponds to the lake's northwest arm.

One of the project's obstacles is the water it would draw from a lake already at historic lows that is a crucial migratory stopover for migratory birds from Alaska to Argentina. GSL uses evaporation ponds to wring minerals from lake, which is about 75 miles long and 35 miles wide.

New technology would allow the solar ponds to use less water from the lake while producing more potash, a key nutrient for fruits and vegetables that is sold by the trainload, said officials for GSL, which is a subsidiary of Compass Minerals International Inc. of Overland Park, Kan.

GSL said the added solar ponds would consume 150,000 acre-feet a year of brine water, down from the 353,000 acre-feet it requested. An acre-foot is the amount of water needed to cover an acre of land with one foot of water.

The proposal is under review by Utah, which owns the lake bed. Corey Milne, GSL's site manager, said Thursday that the expansion could "provide millions of dollars in new royalties to the state."

"The need for our all-natural sulfate of potash is expected to rise significantly over the next five years as fruit and vegetable consumption increases," Milne said.

The company met Wednesday with officials at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which controls the lake's freshwater margins and has commissioned an environmental study of the project. The company also proposed to add solar ponds incrementally so regulators can assess the environmental impacts one step at a time.

Milne said the company is the only U.S. producer of virtually chloride-free, non-chemically manufactured sulfate of potash, its main product. It planned to add solar ponds to newly exposed lake bed on the largely lifeless northwest arm of the lake, where salinity levels are highest.

The Great Salt Lakekeeper, environmentalist Jeff Salt, said the new proposal sounds good but needs scrutiny. The National Audubon Society and Friends of Great Salt Lake also have been critical of projects that consume more of the lake's water.

"The fact they're reconsidering the scope of their project is positive and means public pressure had an effect," Salt said. "This may be an opportunity to discuss the project further with the company and state agencies to reduce impacts to the lake and environment."

North America's largest salt lake isn't as lifeless as it might seem. The lake harbors tiny brine shrimp, a food source for birds, and fish and aquatic plants in the freshwater margins support tens of thousands of egrets, pelicans, terns and other birds. Bald eagles fly from Alaska to winter along the lake.

Some critics have suggested GSL's original proposal would lower the lake by two feet. Reliable estimates are lacking and a University of Utah professor is trying to make the calculation as part of the environmental assessment, said Dave Hyams, GSL's public-relations consultant.

The level of Great Salt Lake varies widely from year to year, largely depending on snowmelt from three major rivers that drain the Wasatch mountains.

The lake is approaching a historic low, which amplifies water loss by increasing evaporation, Salt said.

"This is one of last places birds can depend on in the middle of America," he said. "There may be a solution that allows the company to carry out its project and minimize the impact to the lake, the environment and wildlife."

GSL has been operating on the shores of the Great Salt Lake near Ogden since 1970.

Jason Gipson, chief of the Corps' Nevada-Utah Regulatory Branch, wasn't available for comment Thursday, which is a federal holiday.

State regulators at the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands hadn't heard of the company's proposed change and also were taking Veteran's Day off, agency spokesman Jason Curry said.

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