

Colorado River lawsuit can go on

LV judge drops Mexican farmers as plaintiffs

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A lawsuit over a leaky Colorado River canal will be allowed to continue, but one of its key plaintiffs has been dropped from the case by a federal judge in Las Vegas.

U.S. District Judge Philip Pro ruled Monday that agricultural interests in Mexico have no standing in an American court. The economic development council of Mexicali, Mexico, has vowed to appeal Pro's decision to drop Mexican farmers from the lawsuit.

As it stands now, conservationists in the United States are the sole plaintiffs in the lawsuit, filed a year ago to block plans to rebuild a stretch of California's All-American Canal.

In February, Pro dismissed all but one of the lawsuit's eight counts. His ruling this week reinforced that decision.

The only count that remains concerns allegations of violations of the National Environmental Policy Act.

The All-American Canal was built in 1928 to supply Colorado River water to California's Imperial Valley, where it is

used to irrigate more than 700 square miles of cropland.

A 23-mile section of the canal has been leaking river water into a groundwater aquifer shared with Mexico for decades. Plaintiffs in the case claim that farmers and wildlife south of the border have come to depend on the seepage.

Nevada joined the federal government's side of the lawsuit last year, citing the importance of the canal improvements to interstate water agreements that help protect the state's share of the Colorado River.

"Essentially from our standpoint ... anything that eliminates seepage and the loss of water, we're in favor of," said Scott Huntley, spokesman for the Southern Nevada Water Authority.

California officials believe that the \$135 million construction project, slated for completion as early as 2008, could prevent billions of gallons of river water from seeping from the canal each year. That water, enough to supply about 130,000 households, would go to San Diego for municipal use.