# A major step for Las Vegas' new airport to begin in 2025

## A major step in the process of building a new airport south of Las Vegas to supplement Harry Reid International Airport operations is expected to begin sometime this year.

Desert tortoise (Las Vegas Review-Journal/File)

A major step in the process of building a new airport south of Las Vegas to supplement Harry Reid International Airport operations is expected to begin sometime this year.

The Southern Nevada Supplemental Airport in the Ivanpah Valley between Jean and Primm just east of Interstate 15 has been under consideration for decades. For various reasons over the years — the economic downturn of the late 2000s and the COVID-19 shutdown in 2020 among them — the Clark County Department of Aviation has kept plans on the shelf as Reid slowly continued growing.

With a record number of passengers over the past three years, with Reid serving 58.4 million people in 2024, airport administrators knew it was time to get busy on SNSA again.

Its current development timeline presumes a possible opening in 2037 and no cost estimates have been placed on the airport that would have two runways and a terminal building as well as utilities and roadways to the facility and, possibly, a rail line connecting Las Vegas to the new airport.

But now two desert species — the beloved desert tortoise and a plant that only grows in certain parts of the Mojave Desert — could trip up the airport's environmental review, which is expected to begin this year, and hinder the project's fast development.

Sen. Reid helped secure land

It was in 2000 that former U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., who first took office in 1987 en route to a career that eventually would place him in the role of Senate majority leader, guided passage of what would become known as the Ivanpah Valley Airport Public Lands Transfer Act.

The bill, signed into law by President Bill Clinton, directed the secretary of the Interior to convey 6,500 acres of federal public lands under the Bureau of Land Management to Clark County for the development of an airport and related infrastructure.

The law also requires the secretary of Transportation to consult with the Interior secretary to abide by the National

Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to get a record of decision to enable permits for the development of an airport.

A key aspect of NEPA is to draft an environmental impact statement that would require the evaluation of the environmental effects of development.

It won't just be on 6,500 acres of proposed airport land — it also will include reviews of the airspace surrounding the airport site, including how aircraft noise could affect California's Mojave National Preserve just south of the airport site.

Once the environmental review process begins, agencies will have two years to complete their evaluation of the transition from the desert to an airport.

In addition to the protection and management of petroglyph resources on the ground, the environmental impact statement will address the airport's threats to endangered or imperiled species of animals and plants.

"There are multiple endangered species issues as well as potential conflicts with Mojave National Preserve just across the border," Patrick Donnelly, the Great Basin director of the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a recent telephone interview.

Donnelly, a conservation biologist for the Tucson, Arizona

nonprofit center, is based in Pahrump with oversight of desert land in Nevada, Utah and a sliver of California. He lobbies for environmental causes, leads field tours of the lands he's entrusted to protect and advises the center's legal team of more than 60 attorneys on litigation involving environmental protection.

Donnelly said with Reid continuing to grow and the need for a supplemental airport on the horizon, he felt it important to explain that plans moving forward aren't necessarily a slam dunk for approval.

"Congress gave them (Clark County) land to build an airport on, but there's no authorization for anything to be built," Donnelly said. "That's what the environmental impact statement is for. And so that's an important thing to bear in mind is that an environmental impact statement, if the law is taken at its face value, is a yes-or-no process."

Clark County Deputy Aviation Director James Chrisley is the lead administrator of the Southern Nevada Supplemental Airport project and is working with leaders from the Federal Aviation Administration and the BLM that will draft the environmental impact statement. While the Clark County Department of Aviation is leading the initial planning for the airport, it's the FAA and BLM that will serve as the Joint Lead Agency, or JLA, conducting the environmental review.

Tortoise inhabitants

Donnelly is already anticipating the environmental review of the land will encounter desert tortoises.

“The desert tortoise is widespread across Southern Nevada of course, but it is a threatened species, federally threatened, and so it’s protected,” Donnelly said. “And in many ways, the conservation of the desert tortoise has been one of the biggest factors shaping how and when Las Vegas has developed.”

Desert tortoises are plentiful across local desert land. In a recent environmental review of land near Pahrump for a solar plant project, a study estimated there to be 50 tortoises. After the project was started, it was determined there were closer to 150.

“They spend a lot of their time in burrows and the drier it is and the worse conditions are, the more difficult they are to find because there won’t even be a sign of them walking around,” Donnelly said. “They just stay in their burrows until it rains.”

Because the tortoise is protected under the Endangered Species Act, agencies conducting assessments often say no to development in initial phases.

“As much as my group would like it to be the case that

agencies are routinely left and right saying no to development based on endangered species, that's not what happens," he said. "In reality, what happens is developers have to come up with lots of mitigation."

In the case of tortoise mitigation, developers often suggest the translocation of the animals – which Donnelly said rarely works.

He explained that peer-reviewed science shows that translocation won't save a species.

"When we're thinking about the impacts to endangered species, it's not just that we could crush a tortoise beneath a bulldozer, it's that we're going to harm the ability of the tortoise to reproduce and to persist in the future by destroying its habitat," he said.

Rare desert plant

Another species the JLA is expected to encounter is the white-margined penstemon, known scientifically as penstemon albomarginatus, a perennial plant that grows in three locations within the Mojave Desert, including the Ivanpah Valley.

Donnelly said the success of transplanting flora is even less likely than moving tortoises.

Because the penstemon flourishes in the spring, Donnelly expects biologists will be in the field to survey in the next few months. He doesn't expect the flower to stop the airport, but is hopeful some airport boundaries could be adjusted to preserve the plants that are there.

With the airspace over the Mojave National Preserve likely to be affected by the airport, Donnelly expects the National Park Service to become involved in the environmental review process in a bid to maintain the solitude of the preserve. How that will play out will depend on other portions of the study to be completed by the FAA in terms of future aircraft approach patterns.

It's still unclear just how much traffic the new airport would have and airport officials have said it's too early to determine what kinds of flights would use the new airport.

Later in the process, decisions will be made on whether just international or domestic airlines would use the airport, whether air cargo or passenger flights would be dominant or other operational issues.

One other aspect of the environmental process has crossed Donnelly's mind — the possibility that the process will be different from the past under President Donald Trump.

But Donnelly is confident Congress will keep the process a

bipartisan affair and that Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., has embraced ownership of Reid's legislation designating the land for the airport and will make sure environmental policy will be observed.

Chrisley isn't ready to talk about specific environmental concerns since the JLA's work hasn't begun.

"We're hopeful that the joint lead agencies will issue that notice of intent sometime this year, and the two-year clock will start when that happens," Chrisley said. "But that's their decision when they think they're ready to start that process."

Contact Richard N. Velotta at rvelotta@reviewjournal.com or 702-477-3893. Follow @RickVelotta on X.