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# 'Third Straw' uncapped to provide Lake Mead water to Vegas



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*In this June 1, 2015 file photo, a steel cap on top of a water intake riser holds back the water of Lake Mead in a tunnel under construction near Boulder City, Nev. Flooding the tunnel has now been finished, ... more >*  
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By KEN RITTER - Associated Press - Wednesday, September 23, 2015

LAS VEGAS (AP) - The intake was unplugged Wednesday to finish flooding an \$817 million tunnel and complete a complicated and perilous "Third Straw" project to draw drinking water for Las Vegas from a shrinking Lake Mead.

An 8.6-ton steel ball was hoisted to a barge, Southern Nevada Water Authority spokesman Bronson Mack said, in essence pulling the plug on a massive lake-bottom structure built somewhat like a big bathtub drain.

"It's a milestone. We're ready for operation," project chief Jim Nickerson, of Vegas Tunnel Constructors, said ahead of the final act in the six-year project.

The pipeline won't draw more water from the lake than before, or make the surface level drop any faster. But it will keep taps flowing in Las Vegas homes and casinos even if drought-stricken Lake Mead drops to its lowest levels, officials said.

The next step will be completion in 2020 of a third pumping station. That job begins next month and will cost another \$650 million.

Some questions and answers about the project:

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#### WHY IS THE NEW INTAKE NEEDED?

The new pipeline can draw water from the deepest part of Lake Mead, the snowmelt-fed Colorado River reservoir behind Hoover Dam that provides more than 90 percent of Las Vegas' drinking water supply.

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Erika Moonin, water authority project manager, said Tuesday it should ensure an uninterrupted supply far into the future.

The new intake taps the lake at 860 feet above sea level. That's 190 feet below the tallest existing intake and 218 feet below the lake's surface level Wednesday.

The reservoir is down 147 feet from when it was at full capacity in 1983. It's currently 38 percent full.

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