

## Utah Rivers Council Statement on the Governor’s State Water Strategy Advisory Team’s 2016 Draft Water Strategy Proposal

### Background

For the last two years, an Advisory Team heavily dominated by water lobbyists has been writing a new long-term water plan for Utah. The lobbyists running this Advisory Team have worked in backrooms to ensure the plan meets their agenda of spending billions on unnecessary water projects like the Bear River Water Grab and the Lake Powell Pipeline while creating obstacles to conserving water and other less expensive alternatives to these unnecessary projects.

These same lobbyists have been busy at the Utah Legislature pushing both the Lake Powell Pipeline and the Bear River Water Grab, against the express wishes of many members of the public. Although some may not realize it, these lobbyists include several Utah water districts, which have poured millions of dollars into moving these destructive water projects forward. Although some may not know what these agencies do, water districts make their revenues from selling water and by collecting property taxes from homeowners and businesses.

Through their own admittance, the water lobbyists at the September Advisory Team meeting stated they hope this report will be finished for their lobbying activities during the 2017 Legislative Session – although they didn’t want to distribute it to the public or receive public comment on the proposal.

### **NOTE TO ADVISORY TEAM:**

**This draft document is being prepared for the Governor’s Office by the Water Strategy Advisory Team. This draft is under review and has not been vetted by the Team. This draft is only for editing purposes and should not be distributed to anyone outside of the Team.**

Above: Bold red text from the cover of the Plan makes it clear the Advisory Team does not want public input

The Advisory Team created 5 scenarios to meet Utah’s future water needs, 4 of which call for building both the Lake Powell Pipeline and the Bear River Water Grab. The only alternative that did not include these two destructive water projects was one which described a dystopian future with “very little grass for homes or in public spaces.” The

Advisory Team Draft frequently tries to tip the scales in favor of these unnecessary and destructive projects.

Such subjective planning efforts aim to misinform the public with meaningless green washing while doing little to change the status quo of wasteful water use and unneeded projects in Utah. Instead of identifying meaningful solutions to save water, which are abundant, far less expensive, and do not impact our environment, the lobbyists running the Advisory Team devised misinformation to dissuade readers from these solutions.

It should also be noted that although some members of the task force worked to provide meaningful input, the lobbyists running the effort behind the scenes worked to ensure that the draft document offers a one-sided presentation to the Utah Legislature. For instance, in stating over and over that large, expensive water projects must be developed *now*, the lobbyists who created this report completely disregard the viable alternatives offered in the 2015 Legislative Audit of Utah water. View the 82-page audit here:

[http://le.utah.gov/audit/15\\_01rpt.pdf](http://le.utah.gov/audit/15_01rpt.pdf)

Specific Problems with the Advisory Team Plan include:

### **Hostility towards meaningful water conservation**

Many members of the Advisory Team sell water as their primary business function, and that incentivizes them against meaningful water conservation. This is one reason why Utah is America's most wasteful water user (per capita) – we leave the important job of conserving water in the hands of the water salesmen. This tension between selling water and conserving it can be plainly seen in the Advisory Team Plan on page 16:

*“Cities and districts budget for revenues from water sales. In certain rate structures, a substantial reduction in use may undermine the income needed to properly maintain water infrastructure.”*

(Pg. 16, Section 1.8: Potential impacts to municipal and local district budgets)

Water District managers are some of the highest paid public employees in the counties in which they operate, yet they are worried that conserving Utah's most precious resource will negatively affect their water district's budget. This opposition to water conservation is one of the biggest problems in Utah water policy, yet rarely is it so clearly documented.

Although many Utah institutions are working hard to conserve water, the Advisory Team Plan also expresses a number of unsubstantiated or downright erroneous claims about water conservation that are presented as fact. For instance on page 15 the Advisory Team claims:

*“Water conservation, in some cases, costs more than development of a new supply”*

(Pg. 15, Section 1.6: High cost of water conservation programs)

This is a ludicrous assertion since water conservation saves money as the statement above indicates. Although some programs to incentivize users to reduce water use may cost money, many programs do not add additional cost to water supplier budgets. Furthermore, the costs of the \$2 billion Lake Powell Pipeline and the \$2.5 billion Bear River Water Grab are far more expensive than simple water conservation programs, yet no data is presented to offer cost comparisons.

Incredibly, the Advisory Team makes more nonsense by claiming that

*“Water that might be viewed as waste often runs into streams...and ends up feeding the Great Salt Lake and other lakes, rivers, and streams.”*

(Pg. 15, Section 1.7: Environmental impact of conservation)

We challenge the Advisory Team to provide one local example in which too much water conservation negatively affected a reservoir or stream. While we applaud the Advisory Team lobbyists wishing to increase flows for fish and wildlife in our rivers, streams and lakes, the best way to restore flows to these water bodies is to divert less water from them. Instead of discouraging people from conserving water, lets reduce our widespread water waste.

### **Hostility to ensuring water users pay the full cost of water deliveries**

A number of lobbyists on the Advisory Team work for water suppliers which collect property taxes from homeowners and businesses. These property taxes have been widely criticized because they lower the price of water, thereby encouraging users to overuse and waste water. Some of the worst offenders of this high water use are government-owned golf courses, schools and other institutions which pay no property taxes whatsoever.

These property taxes are why Utah has America’s cheapest water rates, and conversely its highest per person water use. Yet instead of identifying the many inexpensive benefits from phasing out these property taxes, the Advisory Team expresses its opposition to this simple, fiscally-conservative approach to reducing water waste:

*“Property taxes offer a stable source of revenue which are used to equally distribute the cost.”*

(Pg. 43, Section 7.5)

Six members of the Advisory Team are paid substantial tax revenues, which are used to lower the price of water. Some of these members have hired lobbyists at taxpayer expense to prevent the Utah Legislature from phasing out these property taxes for water. But they didn’t end their hostility there:

*“Allowing water pricing to always follow free market forces puts certain classes of individuals at risk of not having sufficient water”*

(Pg. 46, Section 9.2)

Under the current system, tax-exempt entities such as universities, hospitals, churches, and municipalities do not pay property taxes for their water, yet *these groups often use the most water*. If the task force truly desired to reduce the burden for low-income water users, they would implement a system in which the largest, most wasteful water users actually have to pay for all of their water use instead of having taxpayers subsidize their wasteful water practices.

### **Hostility towards utilizing water from farms that no longer exist.**

The 2015 Legislative Water Audit found that Utah’s municipal water supply is actually growing. At first glance, this appears to be the opposite of what we are always told – that we are running out of water. However, it is true because as our urban population grows, our irrigated farmlands disappear.

Farming in Utah uses ~85 % of all the water in the State. As we pave our farmlands, the water supply associated with the paved farmland essentially goes downstream to the next farm. That is, until there is no more farmland remaining in the areas served by these canals. At that point, the water supply associated with the now-paved farmlands lies in the original canal system, which typically crisscrosses suburban lands and strip mall developments. This abandoned canal water is being ignored as a source of water by lobbyists on the Advisory Team, who instead are favoring expensive, taxpayer-based water projects, which may cost billions of dollars.

The American Farmland Trust estimates that each day, 30 acres of Utah farmland are lost to urbanization. Although there are great opportunities to explore the political and legal barriers to transferring this surplus irrigation water to new urban uses, the Advisory Team went out of its way to stomp on this idea, against the express recommendations of the 2015 Legislative Water Audit:

*“Through the Water Development Commission, study and recommend demand management and other means to prevent permanent conversion of agricultural land and water to other uses.”*

(Pg. 29, Section 3.4)

Many Utahns, including the Utah Rivers Council, would love to see our farmlands protected. However, the reality is that Utah has done a poor job of saving its disappearing farmland. We should not add insult to injury by ignoring the surplus water from these defunct farmlands. The 2015 Legislative Audit of water included a table showing how much water will be available as a function of paving Utah farmlands.

**Figure 4.3 Division Understates the Amount of Agricultural Water to Be Converted to Municipal Use in the Weber River Basin by 2060.**

The Division estimates that only a portion of the state's agricultural water will be available for municipal use.

County	Water Now Used on Farmland to Be Converted to Municipal Use	Water DWRE Predicts Will Be Converted to Municipal Use	Difference
Davis	42,700	27,623	15,077
Morgan	15,300	9,896	5,404
Summit	37,000	23,965	13,035
Weber	52,600	34,008	18,592
<b>Weber Basin Total</b>	<b>147,600 af*</b>	<b>95,492 af</b>	<b>52,108 af</b>

Source: Division of Water Resources, "Weber River Basin Planning for the Future," 2004.  
\* Acre-feet

Auditors found in just one area, the Weber River Basin, the Division was not reporting some 52,000 acre-feet of water projected to be available for municipal use. That's enough for a city of 400,000 people. The Auditors noted:

"In fact, 52,000 acre-feet [ignored by the Division] is roughly equivalent to the amount that the Weber River Basin expects to obtain from the Bear River Project." (p.55 of the Audit)

Its worth noting that the Weber Basin Water District, who's General Manager is one of the Advisory Team's Co-chairs, is one of the lobbying entities that has been pushing proposed Bear River Water Grab and has employed many lobbyists to move this water project forward at the Utah Legislature. The 2015 Legislative Audit also noted that:

"The Division of Water Resources understates the growth in the water supply when estimating Utah's future water needs... By excluding this added water supply, the projections accelerate the timeframes for developing costly, large-scale water projects... Division's projections understate Utah's future water supply by only identifying the new water to be provided by four water conservancy districts... Statewide, there appears to be far more water available for agricultural conversions than anticipated in the division's water plans."

- Pg. 47, Leg. Audit, "Growth in Future Water Supply Should be Reported to Policy Makers"

**Support for Pork-Barrel Spending on Unnecessary Water Projects**

The Advisory Team shows its true colors on wasting taxpayer money by claiming:

*"With respect to the Lake Powell Pipeline, it is important for Utah to move forward to claim more of its share of the Colorado River; otherwise, it is likely that insufficient flows in the river will cause some or all of Utah's share to be lost to downstream states."*

(Pg. 22, Section 2.2)

The Advisory Team proposes to spend \$2 billion for a water project that isn't necessary simply to keep another state downstream from using water out of the Colorado? Does that really sound like fiscal conservatism?