Water Waste Tax Subsidy Bill Dead in the Water

After five months of careful planning the URC closed another chapter in our 18-year saga to give Utahns a tax break and save millions of gallons of water a year in the process. Senate Bill 151, co-sponsored by Senator Jim Dabakis (D) and Senator Howard Stephenson (R), would have reduced property tax collections by Utah water districts that make Utah’s water prices the cheapest in the country.

These taxes and low water prices explain why Utah is America’s highest municipal water user, per person. This high water use is the justification used by these same water districts to claim we need destructive and costly capital projects like proposed Bear River Development and the Lake Powell Pipeline.

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URC Wins GRAMA Appeal for Water Use Figures

After four months of denials, the URC finally won our GRAMA request to acquire the ‘secret’ database created by the Utah Division of Water Resources to sell the myth Utah is running out of municipal water. The State Records Committee ruled unanimously the Division must share a database of water data it tried to hide from us, demonstrating the agency is still not committed to being truthful with Utahns when it comes to water use.

In November, the URC submitted a GRAMA request seeking water use figures for Utah’s cities that the Division had acquired. The calculations used to determine these water use figures – and their accuracy – stand at the center of the agency’s claims Utah must spend $5 billion on both Bear River Development and the Lake Powell Pipeline.

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Citizen Lobbyists Storm Capitol Hill

We were truly inspired during this legislative session by the waves of volunteers who joined us on Capitol Hill to protect Utah’s precious rivers. The URC worked hard to empower members of the public to engage their senators and representatives about a number of important bills, hosting six lobbying trainings and workshops.

Roughly 200 people traveled from all corners of the state to lobby, and many more fought for our aquatic landscapes by writing letters to the editor and contacting their legislators. We often heard from bright-eyed volunteers about how much easier lobbying was than they expected and many expressed how empowered they felt. Many returned again recruiting friends and family to join us on the Hill.

This army of citizen lobbyists continued to grow throughout the session and comradery blossomed among the ranks of dedicated river warriors. Teams eagerly asked to talk to one legislator after another, perpetually building the momentum for sustainable water management. A remarkable team was even able to lobby for an amendment to a water conservation bill, HB 304, with very little guidance (see page 4).

Perhaps most exciting was seeing people harness the power of their voice and push for legislation that would protect our wonderful watersheds. It was a truly unforgettable session and we are excited for our shared future.
Water Waste Tax Subsidy Bill Dead in the Water

Continued from cover

SB 151 would provide tax relief to thousands of Utah families and businesses, while benefiting low-income residents. The bill died in the Senate Natural Resources Committee 4-2 after a robust presentation in which university economists, planners, fiscal conservatives, citizens and URC staff testified on its behalf. A number of organizations also worked behind the scenes to get the bill passed including Utah Taxpayers Association, Libertas Institute, Americans for Prosperity and Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment.

Although the bill died, we aren’t giving up and we could use your help! Please sign our petition for tax relief at our website, utahrivers.org.

You can put a smile on your face by watching our video In Your Wallet or Your Hose? at utahrivers.org

URC Wins GRAMA Appeal for Water Use Figures

Continued from cover

Instead of sharing water use with us, the Division went on the offensive, claiming they didn’t possess any such water use figures, and directed us to a separate database maintained by another agency. In other words, the Division of Water Resources intentionally hid the existence of their water use database from the public.

During questioning in the public hearing from one of the members of the State Records Committee, Division staff admitted they had created their own database of water use figures. The Division said it denied our GRAMA request because they claimed we had asked for a separate “draft report” they were writing which they believed the public should not be allowed to see. This was disingenuous because the URC never sought any reports, draft or otherwise.

Our research indicates Division staff have inflated future water needs using bad math and selective data to justify spending for both Bear River Development and the Lake Powell Pipeline. This research was confirmed in the 2015 Water Audit and once we acquire this database we will let you know what we find. We are sure there is enough water to ensure that Utah’s healthy, vibrant rivers can coexist with its cities and towns in the future.

Our fight to provide property tax relief continues: sign the petition for SB151 at utahrivers.org
Bear River Water Grab Funding Stays in the Shadows

The 2017 Legislature was full of surprises, but luckily lawmakers did not fund the Bear River Pipeline Easement as we expected. We heard from several senators who were lobbied by the water districts about funding $50 million for right of way and acquisitions for the Bear River pipeline corridor.

Documents obtained by the Utah Rivers Council through GRAMA also revealed that water lobbyists met with Utah Legislators to advance the Bear River Water Grab for the 2017 session.

The proposed Bear River Water Grab is the largest proposed river diversion in the U.S. and would have disastrous consequences for air quality and the Great Salt Lake ecosystem. Over $25 million has already been spent to advance the project.

Right: Proposed dams on the Bear River would inundate riparian habitat and impact the Great Salt Lake.

Promising Water Conservation Bill Hits Hole, Almost Flips, Stays Upright, Sinks to Bottom

HB 304 went on a wild ride before dying the last night of the 2017 Legislative Session. The bill began its existence as a well-meaning effort to eliminate the requirement that new commercial developments install grass landscapes. Over the last 5 years of drought, many Utah cities have received ridicule for requiring grass landscapes for new developments while other western communities are literally paying landowners to remove their grass.

Many are surprised to learn that Utah municipalities require homeowners and businesses to plant grass, even though Utah is America’s highest per-person municipal water user. Most municipal water is used outside on lawns.

The bill faced stiff opposition from the League of Cities & Towns, which convinced the measure’s sponsor, Rep. Gage Froerer, to gut this sensible language. Due to misinformation, a provision was added that allowed the state’s largest water suppliers, the water conservancy districts, to no longer have to prepare water conservation plans describing how they would save water. This now-ugly bill would have given Utah’s water suppliers a pass on complying with the Water Conservation Plan Act, written by the Utah Rivers Council and passed by the Legislature in 1998.

The URC, with tireless lobbying by some of our great citizen advocate colleagues, successfully amended the bill on the floor of the House and removed the language exempting water districts. The bill was headed to the full Senate for a vote before time ran out and the gavel fell on the last night of the legislative session.
Bill Consolidates Water Development Commission  
Conflicts of Interest

A bill proposed by Senator Margaret Dayton, SB 11, changes the composition of the State Water Development Commission, a subcommittee heavily dominated by water lobbyists with numerous conflicts of interests. The bill passed easily, and now the Commission will be made up of a handful of legislators and likely several water lobbyists hand-picked by the Commission Chair.

Last fall, dozens of citizens showed up to express concern about the proposed Bear River Water Grab, but were turned away and not allowed to speak because the Chairwoman ended the meeting an hour early to prohibit opposition to the proposed project. This Chairwoman, Sen. Margaret Dayton, is the only one that will choose members of the Commission who are not Legislators under this new law.

The Commission is dripping with conflicts of interest as several of its members make their living as water developers and will sell water from both the proposed Lake Powell Pipeline and Bear River Water Grab. These members also lobbied legislators to fund these projects in 2016 and convinced the legislature to spend roughly ~$36 million per year on these spending fiascos.

Sen. Dayton says SB11 is simply an effort to rid the Commission of appointees from the executive branch and to make it a true legislative commission. However, it is clear the bill is really a power play intended to silence opposing viewpoints by WDC members.

Bill to Help Keep Water Instream Sinks at Legislature

Few Utahns realize that rivers and streams across the state have no legal right to exist. Utah's rivers exist because they are someone's water rights traveling downstream to them. Water users must divert the water or risk losing their water right because it is “not being used,” at least not by humans.

Senator Jani Iwamoto introduced SB 214 to change that, which would have allowed public water suppliers to leave some of their unused water in stream to benefit fish and wildlife while also improving water quality of our streams, rivers and lakes.

The bill would have been a step in the right direction, but it didn't make it far before it was sent to interim committee for more study. That's largely because special interests got scared that it would change the status quo and shot down a good idea before it even had a chance to fly. This is yet another example of a common sense bill that would benefit everybody, but it got nowhere at the Utah Legislature.
Fake News: Bear River Water Grab Delayed

In January, the Utah Division of Water Resources announced that proposed Bear River Development might be delayed due to population growth being slower than anticipated. The announcement was made in part because up until this time, state water planners were using population growth forecasts made before the Great Recession, 8 years ago.

But the announcement is more designed to minimize political pressure than to represent a change in direction at the Division. It’s no coincidence the announcement came during the first week of the legislative session as many legislators were having buyers regret for locking ~$36 million in annual sales tax money into the Bear River Development and Lake Powell Pipeline construction fund.

But now that many Utahns are speaking out against the impacts posed to our air quality and the Great Salt Lake, the Division is getting nervous. With their permanent funding source for the destructive Bear River Development in the bag, they just need the public to forget about the project.

When they announced Bear River Development could be delayed, the Division did NOT suggest they stop collecting the ~$36 million in sales taxes going to the project annually, nor did they suggest that water districts not spend the $2 million budgeted for the project, nor did they announce they will disband the Division’s Task Force seeking permits and approvals for Bear River Development. That’s why this is Fake News.

The truth is we never need to divert the Bear River, because Northern Utah has plenty of water for future growth. It’s simply a matter of priorities. Utah water agencies have spent over ~$25 million on Bear River Development in the last 16 years, but they have only spent ~$4 million on water conservation in the same timeframe.

That is partly why Utah remains America’s #1 highest water user per person for municipal use, according to the U.S.G.S. We won’t settle for this waste and we hope you will join us in changing Utah’s status as America’s most wasteful water user.

Above: Over 230 species of migratory birds are dependent upon water that would be diverted by the Bear River Water Grab.

Right: Last fall, the Great Salt Lake had shrunk to 48% of its average volume, and the Bear River Water Grab will result in further decline.
Yes! I Want to Support the Utah Rivers Council!
To be a strong voice for your rivers we need your help, now more than ever.

Questions? Call 801-486-4776 or email nick@utahrivers.org

Name(s) ___________________________________________ Email (optional) ____________________________

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