



Utah Watersheds Council

CHAIR: SCOTT PAXMAN

VICE CHAIR: STERLING BROWN

Annual Report

September 2025



"The watershed councils are exceeding expectations in the work local councils and the state council are doing. They have assisted and advised the Division of Water Resources on the state water plan and the Unified Water Infrastructure Plan. We look forward to their continued collaboration and representation on the critical water resources issues our state is facing."

— Candice Hasenyager, Director, Utah Division of Water Resources

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Local Councils

Bear River • Cedar/Beaver • Great Salt Lake • Jordan River • Kanab Creek/Virgin River • Sevier River
Southeastern Utah • Uintah • Utah Lake • Weber River • West Colorado River • West Desert

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Background

The Utah Watersheds Council brings together agriculture, industry, conservation, reclamation project, water attorney, municipality, special district, state agencies and Utah State University Extension representatives as well as local watershed council members from across Utah to discuss and collaborate on important water-related issues. For a public body, the diversity of interests represented by the state council is both impressive and unique. This state council provides a forum for discussion, collaboration and coordination among water interests; offers advice to the governor and legislature on water issues; and supports local watershed councils. It also facilitates the sharing of valuable tools and resources that may be available to local councils. Similarly, local councils provide a diverse forum for discussion and collaboration at the watershed level and in turn advise the state council on important regional water issues.

The Watershed Councils Act was passed in 2020. After a delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state council was established in 2022 and oversaw the formation of local councils in 11 basins between 2022 and 2024 (Figure 1). By mutual agreement, the Great Salt Lake Advisory Council currently fills the role of Great Salt Lake Watershed Council.

2025 recommendations to the Utah Legislature

To fulfill its statutory duty to advise the governor and Legislature on water resources and policy issues, the state council recommends the following three action items to the Utah Legislature:

1. Wildfire mitigation and post-fire seeding

The state council recommends the following to improve watershed health: “[f]urther align government agencies and necessary funds to promptly and properly reseed lands impacted by wildfires...to help mitigate the impacts of erosion. For example, after the 2018 Pole Creek and Bald Mountain wildfires, large amounts of sediment and debris impacted the Spanish Fork River and drainage, resulting in significant

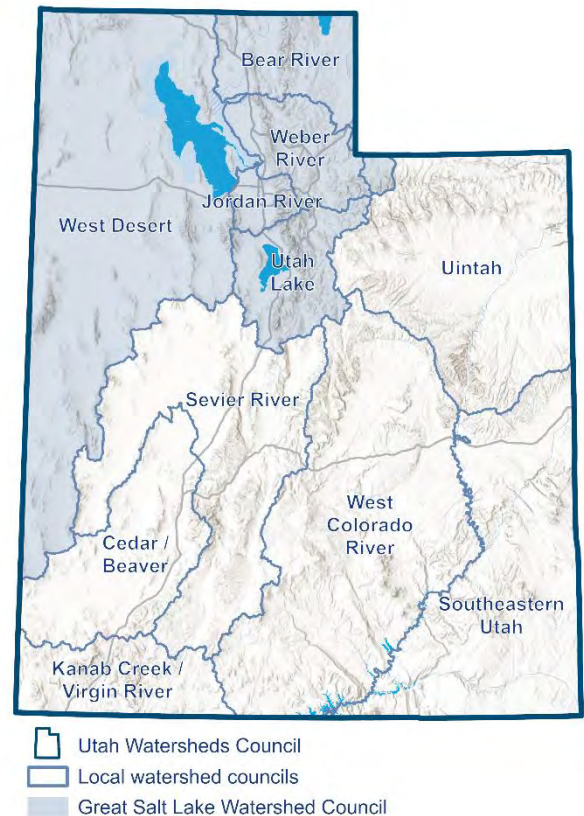


Figure 1. Map of watershed council boundaries.

impacts to the quality of Utah Lake and its tributaries and significant, increased costs to industry and local governments. A focus on wildfire mitigation and an increase in the number of resources available immediately after a wildfire would facilitate large area reseeding projects, reducing the amount of erosion and limiting its detrimental impacts” (Utah Lake Watershed Council).

2. Improved coordination with the United States Forest Service

The state council recommends improved coordination efforts between Utah and the U.S. Forest Service at state and regional levels. Because the Forest Service manages a significant portion of Utah’s watersheds, increased collaboration will benefit water resources, infrastructure, communities and agencies.

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3. Watershed Council code modification

To avoid confusion, change the name of Southeast Colorado River Watershed Council to Southeastern Utah Watershed Council in Utah Code 73-10g.

2025 watershed council activities

Local council reports

Local councils report to the state council at each quarterly meeting to educate on basin hydrology and management, review recent activities and present water-related concerns for state council discussion and action.

State water plan

The watershed councils are playing an important role in the development of the 2026 State Water Plan. Over the summer, councils provided information for the “Basin Perspectives” chapter of the plan, which will highlight the water-related challenges and needs in each of Utah’s watersheds. This input will help reduce knowledge gaps, increase local ownership and contribute to a well-rounded document that serves the entire state.

This fall, the councils will help Utah’s Division of Water Resources host “Water Talks”, or public scoping meetings, in which members of the public can learn about the state water plan and express their communities’ water planning priorities (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Members of the local watershed council and public at the Southeastern Utah Water Talk in Monticello, the first in a series of public scoping meetings for the 2026 State Water Plan.

Presentations and site visits

The state council hosted presentations on many topics this year, including the Unified Water Infrastructure Plan, Water Fee Study, 2026 State Water Plan and Drinking Water Source Protection program. Presenters have expressed the benefit of the watershed councils as pre-built, knowledgeable stakeholder groups. At the invitation of the Kanab Creek/Virgin River Watershed Council, the council held its January 2025 meeting in Kane County, during which members visited Jackson Flat Reservoir and received an overview of local water management and plans (Figure 3).



Figure 3. State council members on a site visit to Jackson Flat Reservoir in Kane County, Utah.

Likewise, local councils discussed a wide array of topics such as groundwater recharge, Great Salt Lake conservation, watershed health, impacts of wildfire and more. Many councils took site visits to see project areas firsthand (Figures 4, 5, 6). These discussions improve local collaboration and prepare the councils to advise the state council.

“There is a lot to be done in our basin to address interconnected issues of Great Salt Lake, drought, growth, prosperity and environmental quality. We see a positive role for our watershed council in convening stakeholders and engaging the public in important conversations about water stewardship.”

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– Laura Briefer, Jordan River Watershed Council
Chair and Salt Lake City Department of Public
Utilities Director

Local watershed council initiatives

In addition to their statutory role, some local councils have initiated additional projects to benefit their watersheds. For example, West Colorado River Watershed Council is developing a comprehensive map of the watershed and a project database to inform its coordination and advisory efforts. Jordan River and Utah Lake watershed councils are working on cross-basin collaboration to reflect the interconnected nature of their watersheds. Cedar/Beaver Watershed Council is exploring future participation in the Watershed Restoration Initiative program.



Figure 4. West Desert Watershed Council visited Morton Salt Plant to learn how industries impact Great Salt Lake and Utah's economy.

Review of the Watershed Councils Act

As directed in the Watershed Councils Act, the Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment Interim Committee shall end its review of the act before September 30, 2025 and submit a report of its recommendations to the Legislature before January 1, 2026. As written in Utah Code 73-10g-309, the state council “shall clearly identify for the...committee the public purposes and interests for which the councils were originally created and whether those public purposes and interests are still relevant and being adequately addressed through the councils”. Legislation

outlines the following specific purposes for the state council (1-5) and local councils (6):

1. Serve as a forum to encourage and facilitate discussion by and among the stakeholders relative to the water-related interests of the state and the state's people and institutions.

The state council meets quarterly to discuss ongoing water-related issues and projects at the watershed and state levels, including presentations from local watershed councils, state and federal agencies and additional stakeholders.

2. Facilitate communication and collaboration between the Department of Natural Resources, Department of Agriculture and Food, Department of Environmental Quality and other state and federal agencies in the administration and implementation of water-related activities.

The executive directors of the departments of Natural Resources, Environmental Quality and Agriculture and Food attend state council meetings in which they coordinate on water issues. Additionally, employees of the divisions of Water Resources, Water Rights, Wildlife, Forestry, Fire and State Lands, Water Quality and Drinking Water; Department of Agriculture and Food; and more join state and local watershed council meetings regularly, improving cross-agency collaboration in each basin.

4. Consult and seek guidance from local councils.

Local councils report to the state council quarterly to provide information and advice on local and state water issues. Additionally, local councils are encouraged to contribute during meetings, request agenda items and suggest topics for discussion and action.

“Having acted as the Chair of the Utah Watersheds Council for the past two years, I have seen a lot of progress and growth in the state council as well as each of the local watershed councils. We allow three or four local councils to update the state council each quarter, and it is obvious that they are meeting, touring and discussing a variety of issues in and about their respective watersheds. Utah's watersheds are diverse, and it has been interesting

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to see the complexities, differences and similarities between them. It will be important to keep the momentum going by finding ways to assist one another in our challenges and learning from each other's successes."

— Scott Paxman, Utah Watersheds Council Chair and Weber Basin Water Conservancy District General Manager

4. Advise the Water Development Coordinating Council regarding the Unified Water Infrastructure Plan (HB 280, 2024)

The Water Development Coordinating Council presented to the state council on the development of the Unified Water Infrastructure Plan and Water Fee Study and will seek additional feedback from the council before the plan is published in 2026.

5. Provide advice to the governor and Legislature on water issues.

See section "Recommendations to the Utah Legislature" above.



Figure 5. Kanab Creek/Virgin River Watershed Council members learned about the Virgin River Program with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

6. Each local council shall provide a forum to encourage and facilitate discussion of and collaboration on local watershed issues.

Local watershed councils volunteer many hours per year to discuss and collaborate on water issues. Councils strive to reduce duplication of efforts in each

watershed by working with local organizations, state and federal agencies, water conservancy districts, universities and more.



Figure 6. Bear River Watershed Council on a joint tour of Cutler Dam with USU Water Lab, government employees, PacifiCorp staff and local officials. Participants explored the dam and discussed how water infrastructure and delivery impact Great Salt Lake.

Reflection

Watershed council members have already expressed the benefits of their existence.

"The Southeastern Utah Watershed Council has allowed our region to collaborate over our most precious natural resource — water. We are building alliances to actively address this resource scarcity."

— Trisha Hedin, Southeastern Utah Watershed Council Co-Chair and Grand County Commissioner

Although the councils are relatively young, they display strong ability to address the important purposes set forth by the Utah Legislature in 2020. As Utah's water landscape and priorities continue to evolve, the diversity and adaptability of the watershed councils position them well to continually increase regional collaboration, support water planning, improve government efficiency and garner involvement from Utahns statewide as they work to meet future water needs.

This report was prepared by Carly Payne, Watershed Councils Coordinator with the Utah Division of Water Resources, under the direction of the Utah Watersheds Council. For more information, contact WatershedCouncils@utah.gov.

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