



Utah Watersheds Council

CHAIR: SCOTT PAXMAN

VICE CHAIR: STERLING BROWN

Annual Report September 2026



Utah Watersheds Council

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

Established by the Watershed Councils Act ([73-10g-3](#)), the Utah Watersheds Council (state council) brings together diverse stakeholders to discuss and collaborate on water-related issues. Representatives include:

- Each local watershed council (11)
- Reclamation projects
- Agriculture
- Business and industry
- Environmental conservation
- Water attorney
- Utah Association of Counties
- Utah League of Cities and Towns
- Utah Association of Special Districts
- Department of Natural Resources
- Department of Environmental Quality
- Department of Agriculture and Food
- Division of Indian Affairs
- Utah State University Extension
- Division of Emergency Management
- Division of Water Rights
- Division of Water Resources

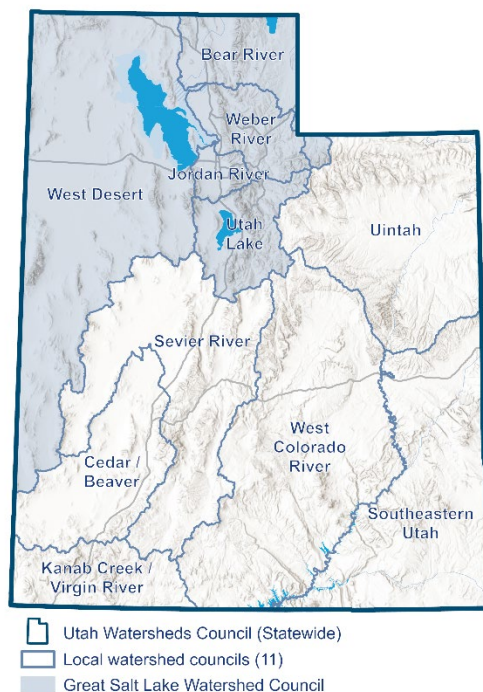


Figure 1. Map of watershed council boundaries.

The state council gathers stakeholder input on water policy and management for the Legislature, governor and state agencies.

Local watershed councils similarly provide a diverse forum for discussion and collaboration for each watershed and in turn advise the state council on important regional water issues. The state council has established local councils in 11 watersheds covering the entire state (Figure 1). By mutual agreement, the Great Salt Lake Advisory Council currently fills the role of Great Salt Lake Watershed Council.

Recommendations to Utah Legislature and governor

To fulfill its statutory duty to advise the governor and Legislature on water resources and policy issues ([73-10g-305](#)), the Utah Watersheds Council requests support and recommends the following priorities to state decision-makers:

Request for appropriation

1. Watershed council staff support

Fund four new full-time employees to support local watershed councils, ensuring councils can fulfill statutory duties, engage in developing the state water plan ([73-10-15](#)) and comply with legal standards such as the Open and Public Meetings Act ([52-4](#)). At this time, councils do not fully comply with legal requirements.

The state council presented this request to the Legislative Water Development Commission and Utah Water Task Force in August 2026.

Recommended priorities

1. Collaboration and community engagement

Continue support for and utilization of watershed councils and other collaborative groups to build connections between communities and water decision-makers, increase watershed policy education, and promote informed collaborative action.

2. Prevention of wildfire and watershed health degradation

Prioritize and fund prevention of wildfire and watershed degradation (water quality, wildlife, etc.) alongside restoration to reduce the high, long-term costs of

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mitigating harmful impacts to infrastructure, landscape and communities.

3. Post-fire seeding

Further align and fund agencies to promptly reseed wildfire-impacted lands and increase public awareness to protect local water supply, infrastructure and ecosystem health from post-fire erosion.

4. Radar coverage

Invest in additional radar stations to close coverage gaps and improve forecasting, research and cloud seeding accuracy throughout the state, especially in the Uintah Basin and southeastern Utah.

5. Weather enhancement

Expand cloud seeding capacity and technology into historically unseeded areas, especially southeastern Utah.

6. Water and land-use planning

Align land-use planning with water realities and integrate watershed science into development and infrastructure decisions through continued support for programs like Growing Water Smart.

Program report

The legislation that created and governs the watershed councils identifies specific purposes of the Utah Watersheds Council and local watershed councils. Over the past year, the councils addressed these statutory purposes as follows:

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 discussed ongoing water-related issues and projects at the watershed and state levels, including presentations from state and federal agencies and non-government stakeholders. Each local watershed council reported on basin hydrology and management and presented water-related concerns for state council coordination.



Figure 2. Estimated watershed council impact 2026.

2. Consult and seek guidance from local councils.

Local councils report to the state council quarterly to provide information and input on local and state water issues. These reports inform not only council discussion and agency coordination, but also the state council’s advice to the governor and Legislature. This method of robust, coordinated stakeholder input supports the governor and Legislature in making informed water-related decisions for all Utahns.

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

The Utah Watersheds Council carefully considers the needs and recommendations brought forward by local watershed councils. After discussion and deliberation, the council selected six priorities and one request for appropriation to bring forward to the governor and Legislature. See page one.

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Figure 3. Participants at the Bear River Water Talk, a state water plan public scoping meeting assisted by the Bear River Watershed Council.

4. Cooperate with the Division of Water Resources in the formulation of the state water plan.

Watershed councils provided extensive information and review for the 2026 State Water Plan, especially the “Basin Perspectives” chapter highlighting water-related data, needs and successes in each of Utah’s watersheds. In addition, the councils helped the Division of Water Resources plan and host eleven “Water Talks”, or public scoping meetings, in which members of the public learned about the state water plan and expressed their communities’ water planning priorities (Figure 3). The draft plan was published for public comment in July 2026.

5. Facilitate communication and collaboration between the departments of Natural Resources, Agriculture and Food, Environmental Quality and other state and federal agencies in administering and implementing water-related activities. The commissioners of the departments of Natural Resources, Environmental Quality and Agriculture and Food attend state council meetings to 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.

6. Provide resources and support to administer local councils.

This is a duty that the state council does not sufficiently perform. Local watershed councils comprise non-governmental, volunteer members and have no dedicated staff to perform administrative duties, ensure legal compliance and carry out council actions. The state council instructs its staff person to support local councils as possible, but the workload exceeds a single person’s capacity. To correct this failure, the state council requested 2027 legislative appropriation to provide local councils with the necessary support. In addition, the council is collaborating with various state agencies and programs to develop alignment and shared support if and where possible.

7. Advise the Water Development Coordinating Council regarding the Unified Water Infrastructure Plan.

The state council provided feedback on the Unified Water Infrastructure Plan, which was adopted by the Water Development Coordinating Council on March 1, 2026. The plan is a comprehensive prioritized list of water infrastructure projects that will potentially need state financial assistance.



Figure 4. Members of the Kanab Creek/Virgin River Watershed Council on a site visit to learn about the development of Chief Toquer Reservoir and ongoing water planning in Washington County.

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8. (Local councils) Provide a forum to encourage and facilitate discussion of and collaboration on local watershed issues.

This year, over 330 local watershed council members and liaisons volunteered an estimated 2600 hours to discuss and collaborate on water issues. Local councils bring existing organizations together for increased coordination, improving the effectiveness of individual institutions through shared support and broader networks.

Councils hosted experts and project managers to present on a wide array of relevant topics. Presenters have expressed the benefit of watershed councils as a forum of experts to provide meaningful feedback on plans and projects. Many councils took site visits to see project areas firsthand (Figure 4). These educational efforts ensure they are informed and prepared to support the state council as it advises the governor and Legislature.

Informed by their ongoing discussion and collaboration, local councils also contributed to the development of the Great Salt Lake Basin Integrated Plan by sharing water priorities for the Great Salt Lake Basin's future and inhabitants. These priorities, along with continued coordination between watershed councils and agencies, will inform scenario planning and modeling efforts as part of the plan.

Reflection

Although the watershed councils are still young, they show strong potential to address the important purposes set forth by the Legislature. The Utah Watersheds Council requests that decision-makers act on this potential by providing local councils with staff to carry out vital administrative and planning duties. With proper support, the diversity and adaptability of the watershed councils position them well to continually increase regional collaboration, support robust water planning and garner involvement from Utahns statewide to meet future water needs.



Figure 5. Watershed council members from across the state gathered in the spring to discuss program needs and develop strategic plans for their councils.

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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