

As Colorado River Water Users Conserve, Utah Wastes More

Utah is proposing two large water developments to augment supplies, while the state has some of the highest consumption in the country, writes Taylor Graham of the Utah Rivers Council.

[Taylor Graham](#) July 12, 2018



Construction workers build a single-family home in September 2013 in St. George, Utah. Growth in the area is driving the call for a water pipeline from the Colorado River, but project opponents think Utah should first work to curb high rates of water consumption. *George Frey/Getty Images*

As the Colorado River basin reels from the effects of climate change, new data from the United States Geological Survey shows residents in the seven states that share the Colorado River are collectively using less water.

But there are key differences in use among the states.

Residential water users in Utah are using more water, even as the state proposes a massive new diversion of the river.

[The recent study](#) shows per capita residential water use declined by 14 percent across the Colorado River basin states from 2010 to 2015. California, where effective policy has led communities in the state to conserve water in record quantities, deserves credit for driving a large part of this decline. By contrast, Utahns actually increased their residential water use by a percentage point over the same period.

Utah has consistently taken a shortsighted approach to water conservation. A statewide goal exemplifies this lack of urgency, encouraging residents to reduce water use only 25 percent by 2025 and nothing after that. A [2015 audit](#) of Utah's Division of Water Resources highlighted the state's lack of conservation ambition, claiming that much of the state has "the ability to reduce water use much more than the state goal of 25 percent."

In California, where Governor Jerry Brown recently signed into law the nation's first permanent water conservation rules, water education programming and regulation helped the state decrease per person residential water use 22.5 percent in only five years.

Utah water suppliers have also failed to update archaic water pricing systems and subsidies that encourage water waste. Whereas some other residents in the Colorado River basin and across the country pay for water through tiered rate structures, which charge water users increasingly higher rates as they use more, Utah residents pay comparably flat rates, which are among the lowest in the nation.

The state's unique practice of using property taxes to lower the price of water incentivizes waste because residents' water payments don't reflect the full cost of the water they use. Many Utahns pay for the majority of their water

through property taxes rather than user fees, a practice valued by Utah's water suppliers because it provides them a stable revenue stream and allows them to keep water rates exceedingly low.

Since water payments made through property taxes are not based on the amount of water used, however, conscientious water users end up subsidizing the use of wasteful neighbors.

Complicating Utah's ability to reduce water consumption is its inability to effectively monitor water use across the state. The 2015 audit shed light on "significant inaccuracies" in the state's water use data and explained how much of the state had no idea how much water was being used. It also pointed to ways in which inaccurate numbers could "accelerate the timeframes for developing costly, large-scale water projects."

Currently, Utah is proposing two of the largest, costliest and most destructive water development projects in the nation. The 140 mile-long [Lake Powell Pipeline](#), which would deliver 86,000 acre-feet of Colorado River water annually to southern Utah's Washington County, is currently in federal permitting. In northern Utah, a proposed \$2.5 billion development on the Bear River [threatens to dry up the Great Salt Lake](#) and create an ecological disaster.

In order to demonstrate the need for the Lake Powell Pipeline to federal regulators, project proponents have estimated water use in Washington County at 325 gallons per person per day. At more than twice the national average, this level of water use is astronomical.

For project proponents, working to lower Utah's water use through conservation, as the rest of the basin has done, would undermine their claims of the need for new expensive water diversions. These big spending proposals are the root cause of Utah's toothless water conservation efforts.

As the recent USGS study highlights, Utah has much room for improvement

when it comes to water conservation. Rather than move forward with costly water projects that will drain the state's coffers, Utah should put real effort into helping its residents conserve and join other basin states in ensuring there is enough water in the Colorado River to go around.

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