

Tribune editorial: If we build Powell pipeline, will the water come?

The Colorado River is not meeting its obligations. Its [Lake Powell bank account](#) is in danger of running dry.

A 97-year-old agreement demands that the river deliver 5.2 trillion gallons of water to seven states and Mexico each year. That isn't happening, and now — in the age of climate change — the chance of ever meeting that demand is fading.

As a result, Utah's plan to take more of its Colorado River water — by building a pipeline from Lake Powell to St. George — may be fading, too.

Utah officials won't admit that. In the American West, water rights have always been a fight to the finish. The issue all along has been that Utah has a legal claim to more Colorado River water than it uses. If we don't build the pipeline, we'll never use even a third of what we're still legally allowed to take.

But the reality is that St. George doesn't need that water. Maybe they would someday, but they don't need it now. While southwest Utah has made progress in water conservation, it is still one of the largest per-capita water consumers in the nation — more than even Las Vegas — with its multiple golf courses and Bellagio fountains and constant tourists in hotter, drier weather.

Meanwhile, there are millions more downstream users who do need that water now.

Sooner or later, Utah's legal claim runs into both political and environmental realities. It's not really even about whether Utah can afford to pay to build the pipeline — a billion-dollar-plus project that southern Utahns couldn't pay for

without the rest of the state chipping in. It's about whether the water will be there if it's built. It's looking like the only way the water will be there is if other places have been denied.

As Tribune reporter Brian Maffly points out in his story last week about Lake Powell in crisis, California has a lot more members of Congress than Utah does. We could end up building a billion-dollar pipeline and never getting a billion dollars worth of water out of it.

Utah has offered a drought contingency plan that would give water rights owners credit for “banking” water in Lake Powell. That would require changing “use it or lose it” laws in Utah and other states that have discouraged farmers from conserving water for fear of losing rights to it. It's paying farmers to not farm, but it's about the only way to get more water to the lake. And it's no guarantee it will be enough.

After just 55 years of existence, Lake Powell is unsustainable without fundamental changes. It contains half the water it did in 2000. The level has dropped 100 feet in that time and is now about 50 feet from the point where Glen Canyon Dam no longer produces hydropower. Meanwhile, drought weather has become so common we can't keep calling it drought.

It's no longer about Utah getting what it is owed. If we build a pipeline, will the river deliver?