

Tribune editorial: This is a desert. Utah's sense of entitlement to water has to end.

"This is a hell of a way to run a desert."

— [Gov. Scott Matheson](#), 1983

That was one of the best quips ever by a politician, from Utah or anywhere else. It was uttered as Salt Lake City and nearby communities were struggling with [a massive flood](#), the likes of which have not been seen since. Matheson couldn't resist commenting on the irony of a state that usually has to deal with too little water being forced to deal with too much.

These days, Utah is back to normal. Dry as dust. There is reason to believe that Utah is actually facing a new normal. [Even drier. And hotter.](#) And without a decent winter's worth of snowpack to fall back on.

But, in many places and many cases, we still aren't doing a very good job of running our desert.

Witness events at the [Benchland Irrigation Water District](#), which serves part of the Farmington area in Davis County. Earlier this week, for the first time in memory, the district's reservoir went dry. Customers had drawn 25 million gallons from it, literally overnight.

The hit on the water supply came despite efforts by the district's management to push their customers to curtail their consumption — especially for the wasteful purpose of watering their lawns — by issuing warnings, fines and, in extreme cases, threatening to shut off access to some customers altogether.

Or, in the estimation of one district board member Paul Hirst, the rapid draw-down might have not been in despite, but in spite. As in a way for some

customers to express their anger at being asked to use less water. Even though simple common sense would suggest that in Utah, in July, there just isn't that much water to use.

The problem is not limited to Davis County. Even though Utah is among the driest states in the nation, our normal per-person use is [at or near the highest](#) in the country. And we encourage this wasteful behavior by charging consumers far too little, especially for heavy users, and masking the true cost by supporting water systems through property taxes.

Whether the issue is the Benchland Irrigation Water District, the Bear River Basin, the Colorado River or the proposed Lake Powell Pipeline, the driest state in the nation likes to pretend that it is the wettest. The answer to a local shortage is never to use less, or charge more. It's to propose spending billions to bring more water in from someplace else. Someplace that may not have any water to speak of.

This sense of entitlement among Utahns has to end. It's not the fault of any government agency that the water some people want just isn't here. (Unless the government entity is requiring property owners to keep green lawns. That needs to stop.)

The usage has to go down. That means the price will have to go up. And soon. Before it's all gone.