

Utah's Big Water Grab

Golf courses! Water parks! Man-made lakes! If Utah had its way, the retiree oasis of St. George will explode with growth, turning red rock to bluegrass and slaking its thirst with a new billion-dollar pipeline from the Colorado River.



Let us now praise southern Utah!

I moved here the high-water spring of 1993, everything I owned in the car and

my savings whittled to three hundred cash. The hitchhikers said Moab, so I dropped anchor in the red-rock oasis and spent the next decade dowsing: mossy seeps, wind-chime waterfalls, pollywog potholes. I guided the rivers—the Green, the San Juan, the Colorado—splashed up the slots of Canyonlands and [Escalante](#), and finally bought my own acre of promised land along a lazy creek sweet with Russian olives and fluffy with cottonwood duff. I loved the small scale of the desert towns. The Mormon pioneers did not develop the land for tourists, loading it with bars and resorts, but for themselves, placing a premium on self-sufficiency and community. The sandstone labyrinths, swaths of public land, and fine-just-the-way-it-is locals precluded it from becoming the California I had fled.

Turns out that my own migration to Utah wasn't unique. I was part of a historical exodus—let's call it the Golden Diaspora—beginning in the 1990s, when hordes of Californians split for the interior, jacking up home prices and residents' ire. By 2012, a whopping 12 percent of people born in California had moved to other western states; 8 percent of Utahns were born in California. That's more than 200,000 of us asking the waitresses at Mom's Diner to sub avocado on that.

We'd also like some water, please. Utah is the second-driest state in the nation, and all that growth has strained the limited supply. The influx of newcomers has been most dramatic in sunny Washington County, where the average summer temperature hovers above 100 and the ground sees just eight inches of rain a year. Home of [Zion National Park](#) and the golfy sprawl of St. George, the county has jumped in population, from 26,000 to 165,000, since 1980; St. George is now the fastest-growing metropolitan area in America. The state forecasts that in 40 years the county will boom to half a million, which is like plunking down a whole new Albuquerque in the canyons.



St. George, Utah (Mark Boster/Los Angeles Times/Getty)

Thirteen golf courses bloom green amid desert cliffs. Capillary culs-de-sac pulse with turf. Plans are under way for a Caribbean-slash-Polynesian water park with a 900-foot lazy river, a seven-story slide, and an artificial wave pool for surfers. Bulldozers just broke ground on a master-planned tract called [Desert Color](#), where 33,000 souls will dwell near the shores of—get this—man-made lakes! The drawings show denizens tanning on white-powder beaches and SUPing across waters that glisten like chunks of turquoise in the 300 days of annual sunshine. Washington County, in fact, guzzles more water per capita than any metro area in the Southwest.

To keep the water flowing, the state plans to dip a six-foot-diameter straw into Lake Powell—a reservoir of the Colorado River 140 miles to the east—then suck the water 2,000 vertical feet through five pumping stations and six hydroelectric plants, crossing the Paria River and what used to be Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument. The pipeline is currently mired in bureaucratic proceedings, but state leaders are pushing to get it permitted

while President Trump is still in office, because his administration has proven friendly to industry. Ultimately, boosters predict, the [Lake Powell Pipeline](#) will deliver 86,000 acre-feet of water per year, enough to support a third of a million people. The price tag for that big hose: between \$1.1 billion and \$1.8 billion, more than twice as much in today's dollars as the Golden Gate Bridge.

Utah has every legal right to its acre-feet, but the Colorado River is already overallocated. It waters seven states, including the megalopolises of Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Las Vegas. Plus, the river is suffering from 19 years of drought and rarely reaches the sea. If its two main reservoirs, Lake Powell and Lake Mead, remain low—Powell is at 52 percent of capacity, Mead at 39 percent—everyone will have to start cutting back.

“There is no lack of water here,” Edward Abbey mused about the arid West, “unless you try to establish a city where no city should be.”

As I set out to investigate the proposed pipeline, I sped northeast on Interstate 15 from the Las Vegas airport. My wife and I live in Albuquerque now, but we'll never give up our single-wide trailer in Utah. Crossing the Mojave, I thought of the dozens of times I'd driven between Los Angeles, where I grew up and my parents still live, and Moab. I climbed the Virgin River Gorge to my beloved jumble of stone and sand, green mountains jutting up from the horizon. Coasting into St. George, the white steeple of its Mormon temple pushing toward heaven, I embraced my L.A. roots and followed the signs to an In-N-Out Burger, where I housed a Double-Double with fries. It was February, 70 degrees, blue skies, and infinite sun. From my umbrellaed picnic table, I had direct line of sight on Del Taco, El Pollo Loco, Jack in the Box, Bed Bath and Beyond, and Best Buy.

The battle over the pipeline is a proxy for the debate on growth: Can towns decide how big they want to be, or are they beholden to the same global market forces that have replaced mom-and-pop shops with big-box chains? Growth is something every town grapples with, but here in the desert it's

strictly limited by available water.

From my hotel Jacuzzi, I phoned Mike Noel, a state legislator and pipeline booster, and asked how he felt about St. George growing to the size of Albuquerque or Tucson.

“I don’t like Albuquerque, and I don’t like Tucson,” he snapped.

“Albuquerque has a lot of asphalt lawns.” Washington County has a similar climate, but it consumes far more water. In 2015, it used more than 49 million gallons of publicly supplied water per day, or 317 gallons per person per day. By comparison, that same year, Clark County, Nevada, which surrounds Las Vegas, used 204 gallons per person per day, and the counties surrounding Phoenix, Tucson, and Albuquerque used even less: 186, 174, and 129, respectively. Santa Fe County, up the road from Albuquerque, used only 71 gallons per person per day. “Utah has yards and trees and gardens,” Noel told me. “Our kids don’t want to play on green-painted gravel lawns.”

The town fathers agree. Dean Cox is a fifth-generation St. Georgian, a descendant of the town’s original Mormon settlers, and serves as a Washington County commissioner. Clad in jeans and a blazer, he recounted the founding of the town, starting with the Paiutes who irrigated crops along the Santa Clara River. When the Latter-day Saints arrived in 1861, directed by Brigham Young to forge a southern outpost of their Kingdom of Zion, they diverted a spring to “green up the grounds of the temple,” as Cox put it, and hand-dug canals and reservoirs to allow the settlers to eke out a living. But St. George didn’t grow into more than a hot, dusty outpost on a two-lane highway where drivers filled their tanks and radiators for the sweltering haul between Vegas and Salt Lake.



Washington County commissioner Dean Cox (Mori Kessler/St. George News)

“What I’m trying to impress upon you is that it was small and poor,” Cox said. In 1965, when he was a boy, St. George’s leaders resolved to convince those travelers to spend the night—and some money, Cox recalled. They built the [Dixie Red Hills Golf Course](#), a rug of turf nestled among the bluffs.

“Since then the population of Washington County has more or less doubled every decade,” he said, unable to contain a smile. “That’s what people do, use our ingenuity and innovation to improve our lives.”

It was easy to like Dean Cox and his tale of entrepreneurial grit. He welcomes the new growth. In the past, most local kids were forced to leave St. George—or Dixie, as it’s nicknamed—if they wanted a career. The area became a haven for retirees, the first wave arriving in the 1970s. One big achievement of this early boom, Cox told me, is the expanded new hospital. Instead of a handful of country doctors, they have a first-rate medical center with a roster of specialists. His daughter works there. “She wouldn’t be here—that job wouldn’t be here—” he said, “without the previous water projects.”

Old-timers like Cox say they have no right to shut the door behind them. He believes that the county needs the water for the next generation. “If we don’t have the pipeline, we don’t have the growth, and we can send our kids somewhere else,” he said. “We’ll water grass until the price of water prohibits it—I think the free market, supply and demand, will provide the solution.”

Cox made some good points. I’m that guy who will raise an interminable fuss to the county council if they even suggest paving the road where I park my single-wide. I like southern Utah fine the way it is and hope Moab never reaches the size of St. George, much less Albuquerque. But the reason my wife and I don’t live in Moab anymore is that there aren’t many jobs except in tourism. Even Ed Abbey didn’t stick around, spending his final years on the outskirts of Tucson.

Cox shrugged off growing pains like traffic and not knowing your neighbors. “They said if we ever got to 100,000, it would cut the head off the golden goose and ruin our quality of life,” he said. “But it hasn’t. You either believe that technology will make things better or that we’re doomed. I believe the world is getting to be a better place. And I’d rather import water than export children.”

If importing water saves children, then the man responsible for retaining the most local offspring is Ron Thompson, general manager of the [Washington County Water Conservancy District](#) (hereafter, the District). Another descendant of settlers, Thompson may be the William Mulholland of southern Utah: since he took charge 35 years ago, the population has jumped 600 percent, and the town has two new reservoirs. I met him at District headquarters, a three-story faux-dobe castle perched on a ridge overseeing the dominion below. Thompson is six foot eight, with a shock of disheveled white hair and a toothy grin. In a blazer that didn’t match his slacks, and with an orthopedic boot on one foot, he ambled the plush conference room like a buffalo.

Thompson told me that the situation is dire. The county's sole source of water is the fickle Virgin River, a tributary of the Colorado that he predicts, given population-growth estimates, will be depleted in just ten years. "You can't stick your head in the ground and do nothing or you end up like Cape Town," he said, referring to the South African city of four million whose water shortage may cause municipal taps to run dry within a year. "They're looking at a doomsday scenario right now."

Thompson is not worried by the price tag. "Water always pays for itself, every time. But lack of it can destroy economies and societies," he said. Indeed, all the major cities of the Southwest, whether you consider them enlightened centers of culture or object lessons in blight, rely on elaborate waterworks delivering the Colorado River.

"If we don't have an adequate water supply, why are we spending billions for education and highways?" Thompson asked. "We can't have any of that without water."

To understand why St. George wants this water so badly, one must exit the debate of practical policy and enter the realm of centuries-old grievances. Mormons arrived in Utah after years of persecution, seeking not to join the U.S. but to escape it. Even as they've assimilated, many still fear that the forces of federalism will encroach. Instead of laying out more than a billion dollars, I asked Cox, why not let the water flow down to California as it always has?

"How many congressmen does California have?" he asked. "How many does Utah have?" The correct answers are 53 and four, but the questions were rhetorical; he meant that if Utah does not develop its water and multiply its population—and with it, its political clout—Californians will rewrite the law to benefit themselves. This isn't paranoia. Western water law has long encouraged rights holders to use their share—or lose it.

When the Colorado River was divvied up nearly a century ago, yearly flow was

estimated at 17.5 million acre-feet. The river was divided into the Upper Basin and the Lower Basin, with each half getting an annual 7.5 million acre-feet. In the Lower Basin, California got 4.4 million, Arizona 2.8 million, and Nevada a meager 300,000. Upper Basin states each received a percentage of their half, with Colorado getting 51.75 percent, Utah 23, Wyoming 14, and New Mexico 11.25. To further cloud things, Mexico was left out entirely, as were Native American tribes, although both were addressed in later agreements.

The big winner so far has been California. The so-called [Law of the River](#)—the collection of federal guidelines, legal compacts, and court decisions that govern the Colorado—states that in the event of a shortage in the Lower Basin, water will first satisfy California and any federal Native American reservations.

But the natural flow of the Colorado has proved to be smaller than anticipated, closer to 15 million acre-feet. In 2012, in fact, annual flow dipped to 7.5 million acre-feet. Because of the West's long-running drought, the Bureau of Reclamation announced in May that Lake Mead may drop low enough by 2020 to trigger previously agreed-upon flow reductions to Arizona, Nevada, and Mexico. In the meantime, Upper Basin states—which haven't built the dams and canals to claim their full share—send their surpluses downstream.

Paul Van Dam is also a fifth-generation Utahn. He descends from George Smith, first cousin of Mormon Church patriarch Joseph Smith and one of the founders of the town. He's 80 now, retired, and I met him and his partner, Lisa Rutherford, in their comfortable home, 20 minutes northwest of St. George, set beneath a spectacular array of red cliffs.

“I moved down here ten years ago because the air in Salt Lake City was unacceptable,” he told me, tugging at his glasses and rubbing his temples.

Van Dam served as the Salt Lake County district attorney, then was elected

state attorney general. While some retirees take up golf or bridge, Van Dam became an activist, joining the board of a local group called [Conserve Southwest Utah](#). A widower, he met another young-at-heart retiree who'd joined the cause, and they've been a couple ever since. They've spent a decade battling the Lake Powell Pipeline. As Van Dam and I reclined on sofas, Rutherford pored over sheaves of documents.

“We fight the fight, but we don't let it get us too upset,” he said with a laugh.

Rutherford disagreed. “Oh, I'm pretty nasty, hon.”



Activists Paul Van Dam and Lisa Rutherford (Courtesy StoryCorps Staff)

Van Dam and Rutherford dispute Ron Thompson's premise that the county will run out of water. The District has more than 67,000 acre-feet per year for its current population of 160,000; by comparison, Albuquerque serves 677,000 county residents with just 100,000 acre-feet. In other words, if St. George conserved water like Albuquerque, its population could almost triple without depleting its source.

The pair point to a 2013 report by the environmental group [Western Resource Advocates](#), which claims that by transferring agricultural water rights from farms as they're turned into subdivisions, and by reducing current water use by 1 percent per year, the county could grow to half a million people by 2060 without piping in any extra.

They also question whether the Colorado River can even provide the promised water, given population growth and the drought. They and other critics allege that the pipeline is just an excuse for Utah to maximize its allotment. "There's a mentality of, we need to use this water because quote-unquote, It's ours," says Zachary Frankel, of the nonprofit [Utah Rivers Council](#). "It's not about the need for water. It's about keeping another state from using it. Who's using it? You know, California has used more than its share." Basically, he says, "It's a water project whose purpose is to build a water project."

Van Dam and Rutherford also dispute the line that growth makes the city more affordable for future generations. They showed me a report by a panel of university economists forecasting that, if the pipeline is built, it could raise water rates more than 500 percent. Eventually, Van Dam said, St. George will have to reckon with the fact that it's living beyond its natural means. "They'll keep building until you have more people here than God ever intended," he said. "They are passing the hard decisions they should be making now onto their grandkids."

The two sides do not agree on the basic facts, and Thompson has little patience for naysayers. That report from the economists predicting skyrocketing water rates? "The authors are heavily involved with Utah Rivers, which has a different agenda," he said. (The study's lead author is a pro bono consultant for the group.) The District hired a consulting firm to prepare a rebuttal, which concluded that the pipeline would raise water rates only 68 percent. The economists stood by their findings.

While Thompson was keen to compare St. George to Cape Town, he rejected comparisons to desert cities like Las Vegas and Tucson that made St. George look wasteful. “It’s not that simple,” he told me. “What do you do with our six million tourists? Tell them they can’t have a drink of water? What do you do with the college that has 10,000 students in it? Say they can’t drink water?”



St. George's golf courses (Allan MacBean)

District officials told me again and again that comparisons to other desert cities are misleading, because of factors as far ranging as density, income level, and local soil composition. They pointed out that much of the new construction is drip-irrigated, with native gardens of cactus, mesquite, yucca, and cholla, and that St. George reduced its water use by a quarter in the past decade. But they did not provide figures that refuted the basic premise that greater St. George uses more municipal and domestic water per capita than other Southwest cities. Both Las Vegas, with its 42 million tourists, and Tucson, with its 90,000 college students, still use less per capita than St. George. Tucson receives more rainfall than St. George, with similarly high

temperatures, which I took as another reason for drier Utah to kick the bluegrass habit. But Thompson interpreted the data the opposite way: since Tucson has its lawns watered by summer monsoons, it doesn't need to import as much water.

Thompson had another theory. In 2011, he told the *St. George Spectrum and Daily News*, "Tucson is primarily a Latin culture, and we're fundamentally a European-descent culture." I asked him if Latinos use less water.

"You tell me," he said. "They're incredibly social people, great people, and they have tremendous family values. The countries I've been in where they have that influence, they don't recreate in the backyard. They recreate in the front street. I can remember walking down Latin American streets, and they're filled with people till clear after dark, socializing, kids playing ball in the streets, barbecues going on, and people sharing. In the European culture, we tend to be in many ways not as social. We socialize in our homes, in our backyards. There's fundamental differences—I don't mean that negative at all. If all your recreation is in the front, you're not worried about a half-acre of turf or a pool in the backyard. And you probably see some of that in Albuquerque, I suspect."

The truth might be less exotic. The District provided me with a typical water bill for a single-family household in St. George. For 13,000 gallons they paid \$31. I checked my most recent bill, and for 9,000 gallons I paid \$83. My gallon costs four times as much.

Had some miracle of the free market delivered this bargain? No. The District achieves its rates through a trusty old trick of European descent called socialism. Most water suppliers in the West, including Las Vegas, Albuquerque, Tucson, and Phoenix, do not collect property tax. But the District raises more revenue through taxing property than selling water. So there's no incentive to choose, say, a xeriscaped concrete courtyard over an above-ground splash pool.

Utah, in fact, ranks second in the nation in per capita water use, behind Nevada. In a 27-page report subtitled “Why do we use so much water, when we live in a desert?” the [Utah Division of Water Resources](#) emitted a collective *duh* when it arrived at this stupefyingly obvious conclusion: “Today, Utah citizens enjoy irrigated green lawns on relatively large lots, primarily because of the large quantities of inexpensive water.”

The deeper I delved into the District’s case, the weaker it looked. In a pamphlet called *Top Ten Reasons Why Utah Needs the LPP*, the District claimed that the water would benefit “primarily the children and grandchildren of current residents.” But only 5 percent of Utahns live in the counties that will draw that water. And the growth is not driven by bunny-like fertility but by migration, much of it from out of state.

Perhaps the pamphlet’s most peculiar claim is that the pipeline “provides more water at a lower cost than other alternatives.” Thompson told me that reducing water use by 1 percent per year and transferring farm water to towns would cost more than \$1.5 billion—about as much as building the pipeline. Three-fourths of that figure, a cool \$1.1 billion, is the cost of replacing lawns with something else. The district is calculating that homeowners will shell out an average \$10,000 for new professional landscaping. Even if everyone could afford that, it’s apples and oranges—a private decision as opposed to a pipeline financed by state taxpayers.

After a few days in Dixie, my head was spinning with circular logic: we must grow grass, therefore we need water, therefore we can grow grass. In what sounded to me like the last gasp of Manifest Destiny, this frugal state may break the bank to grow bluegrass on red rock.

But I assumed that the free market would settle things. If bond investors are willing to risk \$1 billion to water this rock, more power to them. This is how the city of Colorado Springs recently financed its own \$825 million pipeline. If Thompson’s math is correct, those investors will earn a fortune on interest;

if Van Dam is correct, they'll lose their shirts.

But here's where the story gets strange. No banks or private investors are financing this project. The lender for the Lake Powell Pipeline will be Utah taxpayers.

“The state came down to us in the 1990s and said, Look, you'll never be able to provide the water for the people coming here,” Thompson told me. “They asked us to look at a pipeline. That idea did not originate in St. George. It originated in the state capitol.”

This explained a lot. The District does not provide convincing arguments to reporters or opponents because it doesn't have to. The decision to build the pipeline had already been made by the Utah legislature, which in 2006 authorized the treasury to lend the District the funds. According to a *Salt Lake City Tribune* story last January, the state has already spent \$33 million just on plans and permits.

As for opposition, Utah is essentially a one-party state. Republicans hold an 86 to 18 supermajority in the legislature. Its four U.S. representatives are Republican. Though Salt Lake City has had a long procession of Democratic mayors, no Democrat has been elected governor since 1980, there hasn't been a Democratic senator since 1970. State leaders have all lined up behind the pipeline. In February 2017, after President Trump ordered approval of Dakota Access and Keystone XL, Utah governor Gary Herbert wrote to the White House requesting that the Lake Powell Pipeline “be determined a ‘high priority’ infrastructure project, with environmental reviews and approvals expedited.” The Utah congressional delegation followed suit with its own letter, urging that the review process be completed by 2018. When Trump approved the decision to [slash Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument](#), a section of the excised land contained the proposed route of the pipeline.

Still, I knew enough about land and water to surmise that the true

beneficiaries of those master-planned exurbs would be the developers. What surprised me was that the unbuilt tracts didn't belong to ranchers and farmers. The largest landowner in St. George is the State of Utah, which has been selling off a tract totaling 68,000 acres—roughly 15 percent of the city—projected to one day house 40,000 people. This includes Desert Color, with its future sunbathers on fake lakes. In all, development of the tract could boost the city's population by 50 percent.

As much as I appreciated a bootstrapping tale of local pluck, or the idea that a golf course launched an entire region, what caused this desert to blossom in the 1970s was the Interstate system—I-15 passes right through St. George—and air-conditioning fueled by cheap electricity, both of which were delivered by massive public projects. Like many Sunbelt cities, this one would barely exist without the faraway reign of tax-and-spenders. And the upcoming boom isn't the result of individuals developing their property, or of citizens exercising their personal freedom by moving here. It's engineered by the State of Utah, irrigating its own desert metropolis. If they build it, people will come.

Who is this oasis for? I drove up the Santa Clara River to the west side of Washington County. The subdivisions advertised themselves with petroglyphic fonts and Kokopellis: Lakota Ridge, Anasazi Hills, Chaco Bench, Kachina Cliffs. None of the golf-cart pilots I saw appeared to belong to the above-listed peoples.

But then what a shock—at a roundabout on Wapatki Trail, my eye spied an Indian! He clung, 20 feet off the ground, to a slab of sandstone that protruded from the xeriscape. He was nude but for a loincloth, jute sandals, and a feather in his hair. Lashed to his back were three more slabs of sandstone.

Alas, the Indian was a bronze statue, and if he were to summit his crag, he would peer down at pueblo-style mansionettes. But as I reached the westernmost village in the county, a plain metal sign proclaimed: [Shivwits](#)

Paiute Indian Reservation. Out here the houses were stucco rectangles—no green grass or, for that matter, exotic cactus, just sagebrush and cheatgrass and tumbleweeds. I stopped at the one place of business, a gas station, to get a Coke. The actual Paiute working the register looked nothing like his ripped bronze ancestor. For starters he wore clothes.

I knocked on the door of the home of Lawrence Snow, the band's land-resource manager. As we stood in his yard, he looked downvalley and said, "The houses are coming closer and closer. It's like Las Vegas. If they all lived up here, I'd feel crowded. Everything they love about the place, you can kiss it goodbye."

Snow didn't think the pipeline would affect the Shivwits band, which negotiated a water settlement with the federal government a few years back. He said that the biggest problems here were the same ones facing many other rural parts of the country—unemployment, poverty, the opioid epidemic. With his finger, he scratched pie charts into the dust on the hood of his minivan. "When there are so few of us, the problems seem bigger."

The Shivwits band is small indeed: just 305 members, of which only about 100 live on the reservation. In 1954, at the urging of Utah senator Arthur Watkins, the U.S. "terminated" the Utah Paiute bands, rescinding their recognition as a tribal nation. It was an attempt to force the Paiute to assimilate and resulted in a spike in disease, malnutrition, and alcoholism. The tribe, which includes five bands, was finally able to reverse the termination in 1980. Its official website puts a fine point on the ordeal: "The Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah is engaged in the long, slow climb back from near destruction by the invasion of European settlers and Mormon Pioneers. Their numbers, once in the thousands, dwindled to less than 800."

The history of this continent is one of colonists pushing indigenous people off the land. A decade ago, author Rich Benjamin noticed that, while the country at large is becoming more diverse, small cities in the West are filling mostly with more white people. He concluded that they were fleeing larger cities for

what he called Whitopia: towns that were at least 85 percent non-Hispanic white and booming with more new white arrivals. Places like Bend, Oregon; Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; and Fort Collins, Colorado. His prime example was St. George, which in 2006 was 89 percent non-Hispanic white. In the previous six years, it had jumped 40 percent in population; of those new arrivals, 84 percent were white.

“Most whites are not drawn to a place explicitly because it teems with other white people,” he wrote in [Searching for Whitopia](#). During three months of research in St. George, Benjamin, who is black, found residents to be exceedingly polite, with strong anti-immigrant views. They look for neighborhoods with “higher property values, friendliness, orderliness, hospitality, cleanliness, safety, and comfort. These seemingly race-neutral qualities are subconsciously inseparable from race and class in many whites’ minds,” he wrote.

The effect is that Whitopia is only getting whiter. This is not an accident of the free market; it’s engineered by public policy. Last century, as whites fled cities for the suburbs, public money flowed into those suburbs for freeways, police departments, and schools. Now, as whites rush to the Intermountain West, public money flows toward projects like the Lake Powell Pipeline that benefit them.

I drove east out of Washington County along the proposed path of the pipeline, dropping down from Utah into the Arizona Strip—the parched land of Paiutes and fundamentalist Mormons cut off from the rest of their state by the Grand Canyon. I stopped at Pipe Springs National Monument, a watering hole that has supported the Kaibab Paiutes for millennia. One could argue that Native Americans were treated better by Mormons than by other settlers, but in any case the Kaibab band of Paiutes numbered more than 5,000 before contact with Europeans; now the tribe has 335 members.

The [Kaibab Indian Reservation](#) consists of a smattering of homes just a few

miles from the springs. As I pattered down a stretch of two-lane blacktop through sagebrush, I came across a parking lot filled with cars. Outside what looked like any blocky municipal office, but turned out to be a basketball gym, a dancer in feather regalia exited a sedan. I skidded to a stop in the gravel and within ten minutes was feasting on fry bread and hamburger stew. The powwow was in honor of veterans, and I met a Marine who served in the corps for 20 years, from Vietnam to Iraq. As the dance began, he carried the medicine staff while his brothers hoisted the Paiute tribal flag and the Stars and Stripes. A circle of men beat a drum and wailed a victory song while a half-dozen vets, most in gray braids and black leather vests, pounded their feet in place. The eldest danced with a cane.

Because of drought and new wells, the flow at Pipe Springs has dwindled from 50 gallons per minute to five. One proposed path of the Lake Powell Pipeline crosses the reservation, but since the pipeline is exclusively for Utah counties, the Paiutes won't get any of its water.

Another hundred miles up the Colorado River canyon, where the pipeline would dip into Lake Powell, sits the Navajo Nation, home of the country's second-largest tribe (after the Cherokee), with more than 300,000 enrolled members. About half of them live on the reservation, which spans parts of New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah.



Mark Maryboy, former San Juan County commissioner (Morgan Rachel Levy/Redux)

I talked to Mark Maryboy, a former commissioner in San Juan County, located in the southeastern corner of Utah, and the first Native American elected to office in the state. “I always felt like it was just a joke,” he said of the pipeline. “It’s very expensive. But Utah is a Republican state. They’re in control. And they get to do whatever they want.”

The Navajo Nation has water rights to the Colorado that it has not developed, but of the 8,000 or so Navajo living in the Utah portion of the Nation, more than 3,000 do not have running water. Let me say that again: in the year 2018, American citizens do not have water to drink in their homes.

“Hauling water is a way of life on the Navajo reservation and has enormous economic and social costs,” Navajo Nation president Russell Begaye testified before Congress last December. “The only way to improve this situation is through water infrastructure.”

Begaye was speaking in support of a bill introduced by Utah senator Orrin

Hatch that would authorize the Navajo Nation to develop about the same amount of Colorado River water as the Lake Powell Pipeline would carry. The U.S. government would pay \$200 million for the project, and Utah would pitch in \$8 million.

When compared with the Lake Powell Pipeline, the Navajo settlement loses some of its luster. First off, it must be approved by Congress, which could take years or might simply never happen. And for roughly the same amount of water, the Lake Powell Pipeline will cost nine times more. Either the Navajo project has been shortchanged, or the LPP is an extravagant boondoggle.

“Western water pork barrel has always focused on diverting water away from reservations, not to them,” said Dan McCool, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Utah, who has written two books on Indian water rights.

Says Melanie Yazzie, a professor at the University of California at Riverside, who studies Navajo water rights, “Whether or not they want to be hauling water, Navajo people have a prior right to the water. This is another case of colonial dispossession and the exploitation and extraction of our resources.”

What’s happening in St. George may be the result of state water priorities, or it may be part of the great morass of federal policy that has forever bogged down Indian affairs. Either way, the optics of white people frolicking on water slides while Natives haul drinking water in pickups looks to some a lot like apartheid.

I kept driving east along the pipeline’s future route to find Mike Noel, the Utah state legislator I’d spoken with from my hotel hot tub. Noel is one of the pipeline’s loudest proponents and the archnemesis of public-land advocates. He has said that the U.S. Forest Service has been taken over by “the bunny lovers and the tree huggers and the rock lickers.” Representing the counties

that contain Grand Staircase and Bears Ears, he helped persuade the president to slash them, then tried to rename the road through Zion the Donald J. Trump National Park Highway.

I drove to his ranch outside Kanab, a town of 4,700 on the Arizona state line. With a smattering of hotels and bungalows ringed by red cliffs, Kanab reminded me of the Moab I moved to 25 years ago and is perhaps what St. George would look like without the interstate. I left the pavement, crossed a dry wash and an alfalfa field, then wound up a dirt lane to a handsome home overlooking the canyon. Noel met me at the door in jeans, running shoes, and a black sweatshirt.

He plopped down on the couch and yawned. Fifth-generation, pioneers, etc. His wife brought glasses of ice water. If I expected a fist-pounding ogre, I found instead a kindly grandfather with deeply held beliefs. Noel lit up when I mentioned that my wife and I had a baby on the way. “That’s what life is all about,” he said. “It’s a wonderful thing, a spirit coming down from heaven.” Noel is a recent widower, and he and his new wife have 48 grandchildren between them.

“It’s part of our heritage as a state,” he said of the pipeline. “We’re not giving up that water. It goes back to the way Utah was founded. Brigham Young left Nauvoo, Illinois, in the greatest single migration in the history of the continent. He came to a place, it had open land, it had room to grow, it had freedom from oppression because it was outside the United States, and it had water. For us to give up water would be like giving up our firstborn.

“I want there to be farmers,” he told me. “I produce 100,000 pounds of beef every year. I don’t give it any growth hormones. I grow hay and sell it to the dairy farmers, for milk for children. I feel I’m doing what God wants me to do. He wants me to be a good steward of the land. He wants me to produce food and fiber for people.”

Noel conceded that the pipeline will not help farmers. “That water’s too

expensive for agriculture,” he said. I suggested that the second-home resort growth in St. George was actually destroying his pastoral way of life. “It is,” he agreed. Nonetheless, he supported the right to build lakes and lakefront condos. “We shouldn’t use water as a zoning mechanism,” he said.

When I suggested that the Colorado River might not have enough water for the pipeline, he scoffed. “If it went down by 80 percent, our water will still be sitting there.” I brought up California and the other states downstream.

“The people in California, at least they have an ocean,” he said. “They have lawns. Should people in Utah not even be allowed to drink?”

I took a sip of ice water.

“You know more about this than I probably do,” he said.

I set the glass down.

“If we could sit and reason together, I think we’d be better off,” he said. “I’m pretty bombastic in the things I say, maybe less so since my wife died. But it’s very annoying, this whole harangue: no growth, no growth, no growth. They would say to you: There’s too many people on the planet, Mark, you should have chosen to have a dog, not a child. It’s an amazing thing—that’s what people get married for, but for these guys it’s like doomsday.”

The next week, the Utah Rivers Council would file a complaint against Noel, accusing him of conflicts of interest over the pipeline. Noel denied all wrongdoing and announced that he’d been planning to retire from the legislature anyway.

“What do you say to the critics,” I asked him at his house. “The people who wonder if we’re spending a billion dollars so people in St. George can water their lawns?”

He let out a sigh, the kind an adult gives a child who insists Santa Claus isn’t

real.

“Don’t they like lawns?” he said, grinning, sinking deeper into the cushions. “I like lawns.”

Contributing Editor Mark Sundeen (@sundeenmark) is the author of [The Unsettlers: In Search of the Good Life in Today’s America](#).