

# The Salt Lake Tribune

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## Empty straw

### Lake Powell Pipeline isn't prudent

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Disappointment is pushing a drinking straw to the bottom of a cup, sucking, and producing nothing but a hissing, empty sound. Imagine how disappointing it would be if Utahns spent \$1 billion on the Lake Powell Pipeline only to get the same result.

Unfortunately, that's a real possibility. Yet another report, this one by the Natural Resources Defense Council, is warning Utahns about just that. It says that if projections about global climate change pan out, Utah could end up running a new pipeline to a depleted Colorado River that might not be able to supply the water.

This isn't news. The problem is that the backers of the pipeline, who are intent on convincing the Legislature to put the project on the state's credit card, are giving global climate change and drought in the Colorado River Basin short shrift. That is a mistake.

The proposed pipeline would bring fresh water from Lake Powell to St. George, a distance of about 138 miles. It would travel from the lake, through northern Arizona, into Kane County, and on to Washington County. It would supply about 70,000 acre-feet of water annually to St. George. An acre-foot is roughly the amount necessary to supply a single-family home and yard for a year.

However, according to the U.S. Climate Change Science Program, which puts together information from various federal agencies, the Colorado River Basin is likely to face a decrease in runoff of 10-25 percent by mid-century as a result of climate change.

The Bureau of Reclamation — the federal government's dam builders — makes a more conservative estimate. It projects a 9 percent decline.

Legally, Utah is entitled to develop more Colorado River water because it has not used all of its allocation under the Colorado River Compact, which divides the river's waters among the Western states through which it flows. But the compact's numbers are based on measurements that were made early in the 20th century, when precipitation and river flow were generally higher than they are now. Because those allocations were made during a wet cycle of the river, it is unreasonable to expect that yield today.

If the pipeline were built, its water rights would be junior to those of others on the river, because they would have been developed last. As a result, in a drought, those rights would lose their water first.

It would not be prudent to spend at least \$1 billion on a pipeline that might yield nothing more than that empty straw.

