

Summit to explore Utah's water fate

Growth • Town-hall meetings planned for public to speak, hear from gov's advisers.

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Utah's water bosses are gearing up for a series of public meetings around the state followed by a "water summit" that is hoped to yield a new vision for how one of the nation's driest, yet fastest growing states will develop, use and pay for water.

Thanks to climate change and growing pressure on existing resources, many expect Utah's water supplies to get ever tighter in the coming decades.

Environmentalists want to see a greater commitment to water conservation, while others want flexibility in the transfer of water rights and more public investment in dams and pipelines. Gov. Gary Herbert has assembled a "Gang of Six," a panel of experts led by Division of Water Resources Director Dennis Strong, to advise him.

"This process will result in a long-range water plan to ensure we can maintain our economy and quality of life as we grow," said Alan Matheson, Herbert's environment adviser. "It recognizes what we have done in the past will not lead to solutions for the future. We need to be creative and look at new ways to do more with the limited water supplies we have."

Panel members represent various perspectives, such as agriculture, municipalities and the environment, and will each produce white papers outlining recommendations.

Meetings where state officials will take public comment, start July 9 in Richfield and culminate with the governor's water summit Oct. 30 in Provo.

"The intent is to have the public tell us what they want," Strong said. The meetings will begin with a video introduction from the governor, followed by an hour of public comment, then another hour of break-out information sessions where people can pose questions.

But many in the environmental community fear the summit process will emphasize building supply through the construction of dams and pipelines, at the expense of reducing demand. Zach Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council, suspects the meetings will be a soap box for pitching tax increases to finance controversial and "unnecessary" water projects.

Environmentalists prefer that Utah, which they say is one of the nation's most profligate users of water, drastically cut its per-capita consumption. A good way to get there would be to shift the cost of developing and delivering water to the end user and tiered pricing so that the more water a residence uses the more expensive it gets, Frankel said.

In an era of governmental austerity, public subsidies for water development is getting more scarce, so Strong and others believe property and sales tax revenues should play a role, to the dismay of environmentalists.

Strong contends he fully embraces conservation measures, though he doubts the state can conserve its way to water security. Proposed projects like the \$1.5 billion Lake Powell Pipeline are needed to supply the state's growing population, expected to double by 2050. This pipeline, which would serve Washington County, is the biggest project on a \$16 billion list of new construction and upgrades that Strong believes the state must implement in the next 20 years.

But conservationists say Utah is passing up many opportunities to reduce demand and is "light years" behind other Western states. Agriculture can save water by adjusting irrigation practices and lining canals, Frankel said, but the current system offers too few incentives for pursuing these options.

"Conservation defers the need to spend money on water projects and endangered species listings," Frankel said. "We have a 19th century attitude about water. Utah treats water worse than dirt. We treat it like it has no value."

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Utah water summit

P Tentative schedule of town hall meetings, which run from 7 to 9 p.m., where the public is invited to comment on the future direction of Utah's water policies. Meeting sites have yet to be announced.

July 9 • Richfield

July 11 • Layton

July 16 • Price

July 18 • Provo

July 25 • St. George

Aug. 6 • Vernal

Aug. 13 • Salt Lake City

Aug. 15 • Logan

Oct. 30 • Water summit, Provo

Gov. Gary Herbert has empaneled six experts to guide this process. The members, their positions and areas of expertise are:

Tage Flint • Weber Basin Water Conservancy District general manager, municipal water delivery.

Timothy Hawkes • Trout Unlimited, water and the environment.

Voneene Jorgensen • Bear River Water Conservancy District general manager, competition for water.

Bob Morgan • Former state engineer, water law.

Warren Peterson • Water lawyer, future of agriculture.

Dennis Strong • Division of Water Resources director, financing water infrastructure.

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