

The Salt Lake Tribune

Utah criticized for ignoring climate change in water planning

Environment • Council rates Beehive State among least prepared in country.

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Published: April 5, 2012 04:58PM

Updated: April 6, 2012 12:09PM

Most states have failed to plan for their water or flood-control needs in a world wracked by climate change, according to an environmental group's new report, and Utah is right there with the worst.

A state official responded that Utah is planning for water needs, and that if supply indeed dwindles, the simplest thing would be to remove some of the cultivated grass that consumes much of the state's water.

The Natural Resources Defense Council released a report Thursday that groups the states in four categories for their efforts to prepare and prevent calamity. The council's "Ready or Not" report puts Utah's efforts in the lowest tier, partly because it found state agencies ignore the threat while legislators have passed resolutions downplaying the phenomenon.

"It seems like the [Utah] state water plan hasn't really taken a look at what climate change will do to water supply and hydrology in the state," NRDC water policy analyst Ben Chou said in a telephone news conference.

Numerous studies have predicted less supply for the Great Basin and Colorado River watersheds as snowfall turns to rain and temperatures increase evaporation. Timing of precipitation also may shift, requiring greater storage capacity to maintain irrigation water when it is needed.

NRDC says states facing potential shortages should incorporate them into their projections, while areas projected to get more water in fiercer storms should plan for better flood control. Some states, such as California and New York, are ahead in planning, according to the report. Utah is behind most, in the group's reckoning, and behind all states that share the Colorado River.

Just because Utah doesn't have something it calls a climate-change plan doesn't mean the state cannot adapt if necessary, said Dennis Strong, head of the Utah Division of Water Resources. His staff has considered options for expanding or adding reservoirs to capture rainfall and is watching for definitive science that could tell how temperature changes would affect precipitation.

"We don't have our heads in the sand," he said.

Two-thirds of Utah's water is used outdoors, creating a ready-made water bank in the lush urban

landscape. “I can say that I have a plan,” Strong said, “and that’s the outside irrigation. We still have lots of flexibility.”

Utah’s water authorities so far have declined to curb new water appropriations based on drought predictions. For instance, State Engineer Kent Jones recently rejected assertions by opponents of a proposed Green River nuclear-power plant and awarded 53,600 acre-feet for the Blue Castle project.

The U.S. Interior Department has suggested climate change may cut the Colorado basin’s flows by 30 percent, but Jones wrote in his decision this winter that he was “not aware of any available predictive model that has been scientifically validated as a definitive predictor of future conditions.”

Judy Fahys contributed to this report.

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