

The Salt Lake Tribune

Water wise

Prepare for climate change

Published: April 10, 2012 01:01AM

Updated: April 10, 2012 01:01AM

The Natural Resources Defense Council charges that Utah is behind the curve in planning for drought due to climate change. State water officials say that's baloney. We believe the truth lies somewhere in between. Utah has done some good planning and is pushing water conservation. But it could do more, and it would help if extremists in the Legislature would quit passing resolutions that climate change is a scientific hoax. It's not.

The NRDC is a private environmental organization. It has written a report ranking the states by how they are planning to deal with climate change. Utah falls in the worst category.

"Utah was engaged in action to address climate change issues until recently," according to the report. "In 2007 the Governor's Blue Ribbon Advisory Council on Climate Change released its report outlining measures the state could take to reduce greenhouse gas pollution. However, in recent years the state has taken steps backwards on climate change action, with the passing of joint resolutions such as HJR12 in 2010, which claimed that climate change was not occurring."

That's all true. Ever since Jon Huntsman stepped down as governor, Utah state government has been backpedaling on climate change. We blame his successor, Gary Herbert, for that, as well as legislators who act as though climate-change science were some kind of communist plot against free enterprise and the American way of life. In 2011, the state withdrew from the Western Climate Initiative.

The Governor's Climate Change report recommended that the state implement a strategy to deal with drought and reduced snowpack that likely will result from climate change. As the climate warms, Utah is likely to get more of its annual precipitation in the form of rain rather than snow. Snowpack acts as a natural reservoir, storing water in the mountains and releasing it gradually as the seasons warm from spring into summer. With less snowpack, the state may have to develop more man-made reservoirs to store water.

However, as the NRDC report acknowledges, "While Utah has not developed a comprehensive state adaptation strategy, the state has developed other strategies and plans that can be utilized to build resilience to climate change impacts." The 2001 State Water Plan set a goal to reduce demand from community systems by 25 percent by 2050.

What Utah should not do is rely on the Colorado River for more water, as the proposed Lake Powell Pipeline would do. Instead, Utah must redouble its conservation efforts, drastically reduce lawn watering and divert more water from agriculture to urban use.
