



BRYAN WARMOSKY The New York Times

The shrinking Great Salt Lake, seen from Antelope Island State Park on March 15, 2022, has regained about 6 feet of elevation, but the level remains below what is considered healthy.

'Complacency' is a 'huge concern'

Great Salt Lake

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reason to expect those above-average levels of snowfall to persist, he said.

And the increase in water levels is uneven, Hayden said. The levels have increased in the southern part of the lake, home to the state's economically important brine shrimp industry, while the northern half remains closer to its record lows. The water level is likely to fall about 3 feet this summer, as heat increases evaporation, Baxter said. Experts have been

concerned that as water levels drop and the lake bed is exposed, windstorms could carry arsenic from the bottom of the lake into the air, threatening the health of nearby residents, who make up three-fourths of Utah's population. For years, snowmelt that feeds the lake has been diverted for use by farmers and residents.

The fact that the Great Salt Lake is no longer at record lows threatens to weaken political support for more conservation measures, Baxter said. As an example, she said state lawmakers passed fewer bills this year aimed at reducing water use by farmers or cities.

"There's less legislative action when we're getting more water," Baxter said.

Zachary Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council, an environmental group, said he worries that the public is losing a sense of urgency regarding the lake.

The council sells rain barrels, which help homeowners use less municipal water. In the spring of 2022 and 2023, when public awareness of the

lake's predicament was at its height, the group sold about 3,000 rain barrels, Frankel said. This spring, it has sold just 1,700.

"When we're in dry years, people change their behavior," Frankel said. "In wet years, they do not."

Municipal water use in Salt Lake City fell between 2022 and 2023, according to Laura Briefer, director of the Department of Public Utilities for Salt Lake City. But that decline stalled this year, with water use so far about the same as in 2023, she said.

Briefer cautioned that it can be dangerous to conclude too much based on a single year. But she, too, is worried. "I share the concern about Great Salt Lake fatigue," Briefer said. "I am concerned that we might lose sight of the broader, long-term problems."

Joel Ferry, executive director for Utah's Department of Natural Resources, said

changes in the past two years in public attitude and government action could sustain the lake over time.

Conservation laws passed during the past two years require time to take effect, but they stand to reduce water usage significantly, Ferry said. They include state subsidies for farmers who install more efficient irrigation systems.

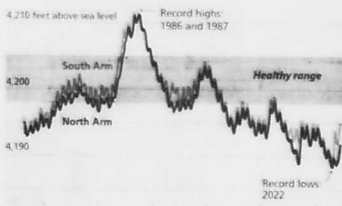
Just as important, he said, is that farmers have begun to embrace the idea that conserving water is good for their business. "It takes time," Ferry said. "But they are coming around."

That doesn't mean there isn't still more to do, Ferry said.

"Complacency is a huge concern of mine," he said. "We are pushing as hard as we can."

This article originally appeared in The New York Times.

Great Salt Lake level



Source: United States Geological Survey. Notes: Data runs through May 15, 2024. Elevation for the lake's South Arm is recorded at Salt Lake Harbor. Data for the North Arm is recorded near Saline. Data for the lake's level is preliminary. The healthy range comes from the Great Salt Lake Strategic Plan.

BLM report: St. George highway over conservation area poses risks

By DAVID CONDOS

At the edge of a gravel parking lot north of downtown St. George, Washington County Attorney Eric Clarke looked out across part of the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area.

Right now, the view is a sea of orange dirt and desert shrubs. But Clarke and other local leaders believe this land will someday be home to a highway which could prepare the fast-growing region for future congestion.

"This road is going to go in," Clarke said. "As long as the traffic needs there and the engineers are saying that's the best place to put it, it's going to happen."

But after years of heated debate, the road's future is in doubt.

The Northern Corridor would be a four-lane, 50-mile-per-hour highway to connect the northwest and northeast sides of St. George by cutting through the southern edge of the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area.

The Bureau of Land Management and The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service authorized a plan for a 4.5-mile road in early 2021. The federal agencies put the plan on hold in late 2023 to revisit some of the analysis as part of a settlement with conservation organizations that sued to stop the highway.

The result is a 136-page draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement released on May 9 which examines six alternatives — including the current highway route — and highlights how a road through Red Cliffs could increase wildfire risk, spread invasive plants and threaten the endangered Mojave Desert tortoise that live in its path. The public now has one more chance to offer input before federal agencies issue a final decision, likely later this year.

This report is just the latest step in the project's long, controversial history.

Local leaders have advanced the highway idea for years, believing it a necessary step to maintain the community's quality of life. In response to the draft, a group of city and county officials — including Clarke — issued a statement warning residents the Biden administration has "taken over the role of traffic planner" for the community.

Conservationists, on the other hand, argue the highway would threaten a delicate ecosystem and set a dangerous precedent that could put other conservation areas at risk for development. A group of eight environmental organizations, including Conservancy Southwest Utah, issued a joint statement in response saying the previous highway plan violates environmental law.

Conservancy Southwest Utah Executive Director Holly Swain Canada said what she's seen in the draft confirms her view that a highway through Red Cliffs isn't the right choice.

"We have an opportunity to select an alternative that does not destroy the national conservation area and keeps our beloved Red Cliffs National Conservation Area intact and is better for the community as a whole."

Her group wants federal agencies to deny the right-of-way and hopes that more public pressure can sway the decision in that direction. "Many of us live, work and play in this area because of its spectacular beauty, because of its protected landscapes and habitat. And so this is an important time for people to speak up for the importance of those values."

In Clarke's view, all of the alternatives come with trade-offs.

If the highway isn't built, more traffic could get funneled to existing streets as people continue moving to Washington County. Cliffs and ridges around St. George naturally bottleneck driving across town. So he said the focus should be on how to limit the highway's environmental impacts as much as possible.

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