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Recommendations to Ensure Adequate Water Flows to Great Salt Lake Leads to New Project Funding
Suggestions for policies and solutions for maintaining water flows to drying Great Salt Lake requested by Utah Legislature in 2019 released in new report

SALT LAKE CITY – As a result of a recently released set of [strategies and recommendations](#) by the state-appointed Great Salt Lake Steering Group, funding for two new projects was approved by the legislature during the 2021 Utah Legislative Session. Funding for the Integrating Water and Local Land Use Planning Project will jump-start the efforts of local governments interested in a holistic approach to incorporating smart water planning into their land-use planning processes. The Great Salt Lake Groundwater Studies Project will look at ways to better quantify the contribution of groundwater to Great Salt Lake and its wetlands, and better understand the connection between groundwater and Great Salt Lake, including the potential effects of changes in infiltration and runoff along the benches and in the valley.

The Steering Group recommendations were developed as follow-up to the [Concurrent Resolution to Address Declining Water Levels of the Great Salt Lake](#) (HCR10), adopted by the Utah Legislature and Governor Herbert in 2019, which sought solutions to benefit the lake and its wetlands while also meeting agricultural, municipal and industrial water needs. This resolution brought together a diverse group of stakeholders along with the Utah Departments of Natural Resources (DNR) and Environmental Quality to consider recommendations for ensuring adequate water flows to the lake to maintain water levels.

“HCR10 marked an important recognition by the state of Utah that Great Salt Lake provides enormous and underappreciated benefits to the people of Utah, and that those benefits are at risk if we starve the lake of its water supply,” said representative Timothy Hawkes who sponsored the resolution in 2019 at the recommendation of the State's Great Salt Lake Advisory Council. “I’m grateful for the hard work put in by all the members of the HCR10 Steering Group, who – even though they represent different and sometimes conflicting interests – came together to identify key opportunities and make recommendations to help the state address this pressing and unprecedented challenge. The report puts us on a path to a better and more sustainable future not just for the lake, but for everyone who calls Utah home.”

In the report, the Steering Group identifies 16 strategic opportunities with 60 specific recommendations that address those opportunities. The strategic opportunities are organized into six overarching focus areas, which include:

- The need to educate and engage stakeholders
- Improve information and decision-making
- Optimize agricultural water use
- Optimize municipal and industrial (M&I) water use, and connect water and land-use planning
- Refine legal and policy options that support protecting water supplies to the lake
- The need to find sustainable ways to fund and otherwise sustain these efforts over time

Finding ways to integrate water planning and land-use decisions is essential, the Steering Group pointed out. Historically, land-use decisions do not take into account the impact that a particular development or pattern of development may have on either water demand, water infrastructure, or major water development projects. Cumulatively, this can have negative, long-term and cascading impacts – even if indirectly – to Great Salt Lake levels and health. The report suggests finding better ways to make sure decision-makers bridge that gap. A separate recommendation calls for stakeholders to better understand and grapple with how shifting patterns of land use affect the lake itself. These deliberative strategies are important in linking state and local land use and water resource policies that are often developed out of context with one another and the lake itself.

Improved understanding of the role of agriculture, whether because of its proximity to the lake’s ecosystem or in the larger context of optimizing agricultural water use and consumption, also appears in the report’s recommendations.

“Agriculture plays a very important role on the landscape around Great Salt Lake. Yet, much of the historic farmland has already transitioned to urban settings,” said representative Joel Ferry, who also farms along the northeastern shores of the lake. “The significant linkage between water and land use is the basis for many of the Steering Group recommendations, such as promoting more land conservation in lower water systems to keep lands intact that provide return flows, and the environmental benefits to wildlife and the wetlands surrounding the lake and the lake itself. We also need incentives for innovative approaches to agricultural water conservation, but really must account for and minimize unintended consequences. Finding solutions to the water challenges facing Great Salt Lake cannot be a zero sum game – we are all in this together.”

All 16 strategic opportunities and 60 recommendations, along with the full report, can be found [online](#).

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