

USU professors stress conservation in governor's water strategy report

By Kevin Opsahl staff writer Jul 28, 2017

Two local professors who recently outlined a 50-year Utah water strategy say residents will have to conserve water use if population growth projections stay on track.

Utah State University's Robert Gillies and Joanna Endter-Wada spoke with the paper about the report they co-authored, "Recommended State Water Strategy," which hit the governor's desk this month.

"What I think is important is we really, actually do have enough water," Gillies said. "But we're going to have to learn to conserve it and use it more carefully. Conservation is a very effective means of preserving water."

Endter-Wada echoed Gillies' comments, saying, "use water wisely."

"One of the keys to the report is it has a very strong statement and endorsement of water conservation as the first and foremost avenue to pursue to meet some of the needs of future growth," she said.

In 2013, the governor instructed his water strategy advisory team to come up with ways to manage Utah's water supply, given the state is one of the driest in the country, and its population is expected to double by 2060.

What's more, climate projections predict a dramatic decrease in snow pack — something that "presently provides more annual water storage capacity than all of Utah's human-made reservoirs combined," the report's summary of recommendations states.

"Everything needs water, regardless," Gillies said. "Given the changes in supply vs. demand — increasing population — what can we do to make sure everyone gets water?"

Drawing on input from Utahns through public meetings, written comments, an online survey and a random sample poll, the report addresses 11 policy questions and outlines strategies to address each one.

"One of the chief architects of the plan said, when we met with the governor — I'm paraphrasing — 'There are things in this report you won't like,'" Gillies said.

Potential solutions from the report include:

- Increasing capacity of existing reservoirs and reusing water.
- Providing funding for water conservation strategies.
- Reviewing law that precludes cities from selling surplus water.
- Identify adaptation or mitigation strategies to deal with future water supply as climate change occurs.
- Assessing new water conservation programs.
- Improve the public's understanding of water quantity in Utah.

Gillies likened the report's recommendations to a medical prescription from a doctor.

"You're diagnosed, we'll give you this prescription. It didn't work for you. ... We don't expect it will all be, shall we say, acceptable to everyone," he said. "In other words, you're going to have to come to consensus, whether it be politicians, industry."

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Gillies believes climate change is one of the biggest factors facing Utah's water supply over the next 50 years.

With climate change, agencies must come up with scenarios about how it will impact communities years from now, he said.

"There's uncertainty in the climate projections," Gillies said. "We'll have more information and more knowledge down the road, so we'll reduce the uncertainty. Then, you modify your management. That's how it should be done."

Despite many recommendations in the report that are specific to policymakers and managers, Gillies believes there's an overriding message for Utah residents in the report, too: Everyone can conserve water and people have gotten smarter about it over the years, but more education about water quantity can go a long way.

"Education is a big component, because people don't know — all of us can't know everything," Gillies said. "It's highly complex."

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