Utah Farm Bureau Federation

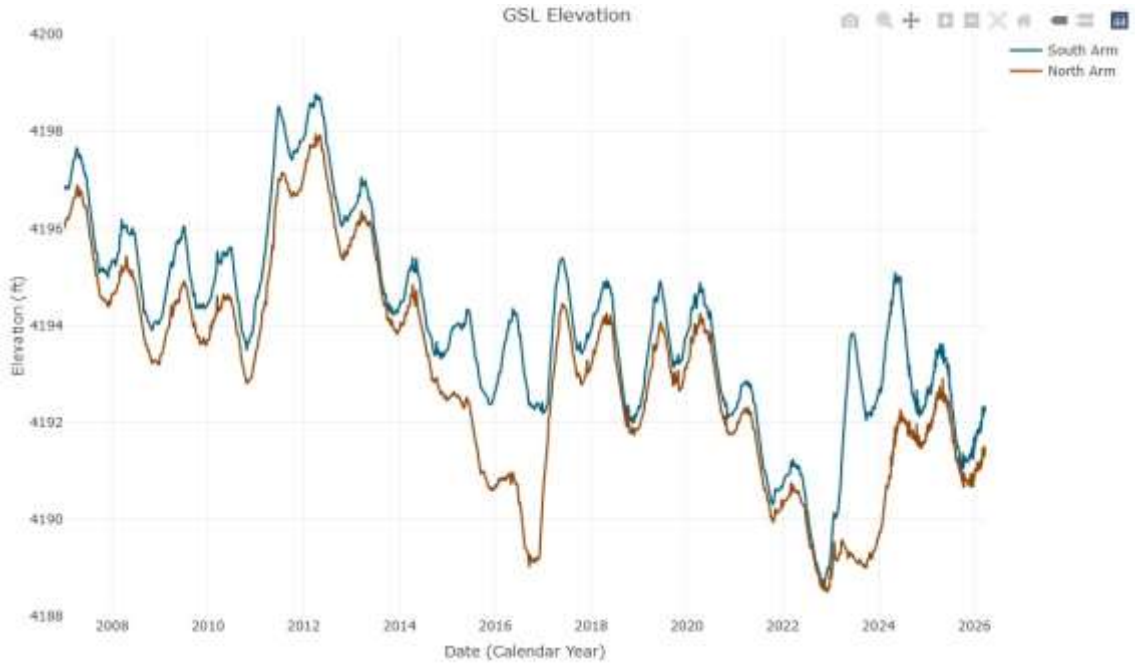
2026 Spring Issue Surfacing Meetings

The Utah Farm Bureau Federation (UFBF) has earned widespread respect for our policy process. Each year, our grassroots process takes root at our county Spring Issue Surfacing Meetings (SISM), where we gather to identify new challenges and opportunities in agriculture. These meetings act as the "spring planting" for the policies that will shape our work in the months ahead. Below are some of the issues we've been considering at the UFBF office, including several that emerged during the 2026 General Session of the Utah State Legislature. These are simply suggested discussion points to help get conversations started, but as always, we encourage county Farm Bureaus to discuss the topics and concerns most important to your members.

Great Salt Lake & Agricultural Water Management

Great Salt Lake has experienced substantial declines in water levels over the past two decades, posing serious ecological and economic risks to the region and our state. Since the mid-1980s, the lake's elevation has dropped roughly 22 feet, and its surface area has been reduced to less than half of its historic average. As of March 30, 2026, the South Arm stands at 4,192 feet and the North Arm at 4,191 feet. According to the Great Salt Lake Strategic Plan, restoring the lake to a healthy level (4,198 based on the Great Salt Lake Elevation Matrix) will require an increase in inflows of roughly 471,000 to 1,055,000 acre-feet per year.

In recent years, Utah has made major investments to reverse these declines, creating new offices and task forces, reforming water laws, and providing historic funding for restoration efforts. More than $250 million has been allocated to the Agricultural Water Optimization Program, which helps producers adopt improved irrigation technologies, optimize water use, strengthen farm water resilience, and make saved water available for other beneficial uses, including potential deliveries to Great Salt Lake.



(Credit: Utah Department of Natural Resources & USGS https://water.utah.gov/great-salt-lake-elevation/)

One ongoing challenge is the spread of invasive phragmites, which consume water and disrupt wetland habitats around the lake. The Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands has removed more than 55,000 acres of phragmites to date, using an integrated system of herbicide treatment, mowing, grazing, burning, water management, and revegetation. The Utah Department of Agriculture and Food's (UDAF) Invasive Species Mitigation (ISM) Program also continues to play a key role in these efforts.

Recent Legislative Action

Two recently passed laws from the 2026 Utah legislative session, H.B. 348, Dedicated Water Amendments, and H.B. 410, Water Leasing Amendments, further advance the state's tools for temporary, voluntary, and compensated water leasing to benefit the Great Salt Lake while protecting the agricultural base of Utah.

- H.B. 348, sponsored by Rep. Jill Koford, fine-tunes Utah's water tools so farmers can lease water to specific uses for instream flows, use on sovereign lands (meaning Great Salt Lake), or for "a project to deliver water to a reservoir located partially or entirely within the Colorado River System (the Colorado River demand reduction program) without giving up the underlying rights. It creates a new "dedicated water application" for this use. This could apply to split-season arrangements where water is used on the farm part of the year and dedicated to one of these uses for the rest of the water year, or for a full water year. Approval does not change "an existing element of the underlying water right, extend existing deadlines, or require the owner to make water available in any particular year or amount." The state engineer processes these applications under normal change procedures but gives them priority over other applications waiting to be processed. The state engineer can deny an application if it would leave an agricultural

field unirrigated for a full season in more than two years of a five-year period. The state engineer may also require annual notices and volume information, and a dedicated water approval automatically lapses if the base right is lost or if the owner fails to meet the conditions of approval.

- H.B. 410, sponsored by Rep. Jill Koford, creates a new program for surface water leases to support Great Salt Lake that is more focused on preserving agricultural production. It does not change existing water lease programs but simply adds a new opportunity to lease water. The bill enacts Utah Code 73-3-30.5 to define the types of leases that qualify for the program, directs the state engineer to prioritize change applications on water rights that will be the subject of the qualifying leases. To qualify, a lease must be for surface-water rights, in river commissioner-administered system, that are already being put to beneficial use for irrigation, industrial, or municipal uses. These applications may allow split-season use. The applications must be filed no later than December 1 for a lease agreement intended to commence on or after April 1 in the following year; with enough detail to show how farmland use will be managed. Applications or split season leases must show at least four consecutive weeks of agricultural use. The state engineer may adjust prioritization (but not the priority date) of a change application if protests or other concerns arise. The bill further amends 73-5-3 to protect leased water in transit so intervening users cannot divert or control it between the release point and the approved use under the change application, leaving regulation to the state engineer, who may treat the water like natural streamflow and require dam or reservoir owners to pass the water through at their own cost unless a separate written agreement exists.

  H.B. 410 also enacts Utah Code 73-34-101 through -402, creating a new Great Salt Lake agricultural water leasing program and Great Salt Lake Preservation Board, a five-member board (three voting members: an agriculture representative, the DNR executive director, and the UDAF commissioner, plus two non-voting members: the state engineer and the Great Salt Lake commissioner's designee). The board oversees the new leasing program, sets annual lease rates, and accepts applications from agricultural water users (including water companies) who volunteer to lease water to the lake. The board is directed to favor senior adjudicated rights and generally limits leased water to no more than two full irrigation seasons in any five-year period on the same field, with each lease backed by a corresponding water-right application reviewed by the state engineer only for the lease period. The state engineer can require monitoring and annual reporting and must report back to the Legislative Water Development Commission challenges faced by the state in the measuring and monitoring of agricultural water leased under the program. The board will report to the Legislative Water Development Commission on any program-specific challenges and must publicly report each year on water delivered to the lake, leases issued, and program costs. The bill also sets out processes by which the Great Salt Lake Preservation Board can use to enforce lease contracts, if needed.

Together, these measures aim to balance agricultural sustainability with the lake's immediate needs. They open new opportunities for producers to participate in compensated water-leasing arrangements that contribute directly to Utah's long-term water security and ecological health.

Potential discussion questions:

1. What considerations or assurances are most important to you as an agricultural producer when deciding whether to participate in voluntary water-leasing programs?
2. How could the Agricultural Water Optimization Program and these new leasing frameworks work together to maximize both water efficiency and economic return for farmers?
3. How should Utah balance agricultural water needs with efforts to restore the Great Salt Lake, and what role can local irrigation companies or conservation districts play in that balance?
4. What barriers might exist—technical, financial, or institutional—to participating in short-term water dedications or leases?
5. In what ways could invasive-species removal, such as phragmites control, enhance the effectiveness of water delivery and leasing programs to the lake?

Colorado River

The Colorado River Basin continues to face prolonged drought, warming temperatures, and rising demand across the West, leaving the system under persistent stress. Recent reporting shows reservoir storage remains far below historic norms, with Lake Powell around 25% of capacity and Lake Mead around 34% of capacity, underscoring the ongoing risk to water supplies, hydropower, and ecosystem health. Federal forecasts in early 2026 warned that Lake Powell could fall low enough to threaten hydropower operations if conservation and inflows do not improve. Weather and streamflow forecasts offer no comfort.

Credit: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Colorad River Basin Negotiations

The most recent round of negotiations among the seven Basin States has been difficult and, by mid-February 2026, had not produced a joint agreement for post-2026 operations. Reports in February noted that states missed the federal deadline and remained split between Upper Basin and Lower Basin positions on how shortages should be shared. At the same time, the Upper Basin states said they had reached their own internal consensus on a durable, long-term post-2026 framework, even as the broader basin-wide agreement remained unresolved.

The practical issue is still who takes what cuts, and when. Lower Basin negotiators have pushed for deeper and more explicit conservation commitments, while Upper Basin states have resisted approaches that would lock in guarantees they believe could shift too much risk upstream. That divide continues and the path toward negotiating a final operating agreement looks as bleak as the water availability forecasts.

Federal Actions

Because the Basin states did not reach consensus, the federal government moved ahead with its own planning process for post-2026 operations. In January 2026, the Bureau of Reclamation released a draft Environmental Impact Statement titled "Post-2026 Operation Guildlines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead" outlining several operating alternatives for the river after the current guidelines expire, and opened a public comment process that ran through March 2, 2026.

As of late March, the federal process remains an important backstop while state negotiations continue. The draft EIS does not lock in a final operating plan by itself, but it does show the range of options the federal government is weighing if the states cannot produce a consensus solution.

Utah Agriculture Role

Utah agriculture is directly affected by Colorado River management, both because of its water use and because of the role producers can play in conservation. Farmers and ranchers, who account for about 62% of the state's diverted Colorado River water according to the Colorado River Authority of Utah, are key players in reducing pressure on the river, hopefully without sacrificing productive operations.

The newly-formed Agriculture Advisory Council strengthens this role, creating a direct link between the Colorado River Authority of Utah and local producers. Its mission, to highlight agriculture's value to rural communities, pinpoint cost-effective conservation opportunities, and spread awareness of Basin challenges, fosters essential two-way dialogue as tough decisions loom ahead.

Discussion Questions

1. How can Utah agriculture continue to play a leading role in Colorado River conservation while maintaining farm and ranch viability?
2. What tools or incentives would make voluntary, temporary conservation more practical for producers in Utah?
3. Regarding incentives, how might effective compensation programs be structured?
4. How should Utah balance short-term drought response with long-term planning for post-2026 Colorado River operations?
5. How can the Agriculture Advisory Council best communicate producer concerns to CRAU and state leaders?
6. What irrigation, soil health, or technology improvements have the most promise for reducing agricultural demand on Colorado River water?
7. How can Utah ensure that conservation efforts recognize the economic and cultural value of agriculture in rural communities?

8. What information do producers need most to understand the current negotiation process and the likely implications for Utah?

UDAF Drought Meetings

Utah's ongoing drought and bleak 2026 water year forecasts, driven by record-low snowpack and reservoirs hovering below capacity, pose serious risks for ranchers and farmers statewide.

UDAF is once again hosting Drought Meetings throughout the state to discuss available programs and resources for weathering this challenge. These meetings offer practical support amid the challenging water year ahead. Here's the full schedule:

Agricultural Burning

Agricultural burning is an important management tool for many Utah farmers and ranchers. State law generally provides significant allowances for agricultural burning, recognizing that burning is an essential tool for managing crop residue, controlling pests and disease, removing excess vegetation, and preparing fields and orchards for use.

Even so, producers have sometimes encountered confusion in the field about how those allowances are applied. In particular, there can be uncertainty when local fire authorities, air quality requirements, and state law do not appear to line up perfectly, especially around questions tied to the clearing index, a measure of atmospheric mixing and wind speed that helps determine whether

open burning conditions are suitable on a given day. This can frustrate landowners who are trying to comply with the rules while still making timely farm management decisions. Timing is important, and if conditions, permits, or approvals are delayed, the window for effective burning may pass.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you had any difficulty receiving permission to conduct agricultural burning when it was needed for normal farm operations?
2. Have you experienced confusion between local fire authority guidance and Division of Air Quality requirements?
3. Are the current rules for agricultural burning communicated clearly enough to farmers and ranchers in your area? If so, how?
4. Do you think additional education is needed for producers, fire districts, or air quality staff so the rules are applied more consistently?
5. Have you ever been told one thing by one agency or local authority and something different by another regarding whether burning was allowed?
6. What kind of outreach or training would be most helpful to reduce confusion about agricultural burning?
7. Are there particular times of year or weather conditions when the current process makes burning especially difficult?
8. What would make the permitting or approval process more workable while still protecting air quality and public safety?

Canals and Trail Conversion

As canals are piped, modernized, or even abandoned, some local governments have looked to canal corridors as potential trail routes for recreation and transportation. That interest intersects closely with agriculture, where canals remain essential for irrigation delivery. Trail proposals often raise concerns about water access, maintenance, use conflicts, liability, and the long-term security of water infrastructure.

Many counties have trail master plans which identify canal corridors as future trail links between neighborhoods, parks, and schools. These plans have increased pressure on canal companies and irrigators to consider conversion proposals, especially where open canals are no longer needed.

Potential Agricultural Concerns

UFBF recognizes that many agricultural producers may have concerns about how trail development could interact with existing water delivery systems. Reliable access for canal maintenance, such as inspection, cleaning, and repair, is essential for continued water delivery, and recreational use could create competing demands for space or timing of that work. Liability is another point of concern; opening access to the public can increase risks related to accidents, trespass, and ongoing maintenance or fencing responsibilities.

Potential Opportunities

Where canals are piped or obsolete, a well-structured trail agreement might benefit both agriculture and communities. Cities or counties could assume liability, and take responsibility for fencing, mowing, and surface upkeep, ultimately easing burdens on canal operators. Such partnerships can create public value while preserving agricultural interests.

Policy Considerations

Farm Bureau may benefit from new policy in this space, especially after recent legislative proposals like H.B. 363, Water Easement Amendments (2026), which, had it passed, would in some circumstances have given certain political subdivisions first right of refusal to take control of a prescriptive easement for water conveyance once the canal holder filed a formal notice of intent to abandon.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you seen increased pressure to convert canal corridors into trails?
2. Do you have any concerns about trail conversion?
3. When could a canal-to-trail project work well for agriculture?
4. What protections are needed?
5. Should Farm Bureau develop additional policy on this issue?

Solar Energy Development on Agricultural Land

The rapid growth of solar "farms" in Utah and throughout the Western United States has created both opportunities and challenges for agricultural communities. As solar development expands, balancing the need for renewable energy with preserving productive farmland has become a critical issue. Some farmers view solar leases as a stable income source, especially in areas with challenging agricultural conditions. Concerns persist, however, about the long-term impacts on agricultural land and rural communities.

Photo Credit: Rural Solar

UFBF policy supports requirements for renewable energy projects to engage in rangeland conservation planning to reduce the loss of animal unit months (AUMs), prevent erosion, and maintain air quality. UFBF also emphasizes having bonded reclamation plans in place before any project is approved, including permanent disposal of materials, as a condition of project approval.

In the 2026 General Session, the Utah Legislature approved H.B. 16, Solar Power Plant Amendments, sponsored by Rep. Colin Jack. This bill makes changes to state incentives and permitting requirements for utility-scale solar projects. The bill eliminates state tax incentives for

solar developments located on prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, farmland of local importance, or farmland of unique importance,

irrigated cropland, or non-irrigated cropland of a capability class one through four, as designated by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Projects on lower-quality lands may receive half of eligible solar project state incentives.

In addition, the bill establishes new requirements for solar project siting and development, including identifying agriculture protection areas. It also requires permitting approvals, decommissioning plans, and financial assurances for large-scale solar facilities. Projects with existing agreements or approvals prior to the effective dates are generally exempt from the new restrictions. Overall, the legislation aims to preserve productive agricultural land while allowing solar development to continue in less impactful locations.

Potential discussion questions:

1. What are your thoughts about the development of solar farms on agricultural land in your area?
2. How can develop renewable energy and still preserve productive farmland?
3. What protections should be in place for agricultural producers who want to lease their land for solar development?
4. Beyond the potential loss of AUMs and grazable acreage, what other concerns do you have about solar or other renewable energy projects on Bureau of Land Management or other federal land or state lands, including trust lands?
5. How can agriculture work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to make sure lands are categorized properly?

Water Infrastructure and Recreation

Water infrastructure facilities are essential to agriculture, but they can also become unintended recreation spots when people camp, fish, or travel too close to them. In some cases, that kind of use creates safety concerns, interferes with operations, or leads to damage that can be costly and time-consuming to fix.

There are also concerns about trespass, litter, gate damage, and interference with canals, pumps, headgates, and other critical equipment. For that reason, it is important to keep these facilities accessible for operation and maintenance while discouraging uses that put people or infrastructure at risk.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you experienced problems with the public recreating too close to water facilities?
2. Have you seen camping, fishing, or other recreational uses that create safety or maintenance issues near these sites?
3. Has public access ever resulted in damage to gates, canals, pumps, or other equipment and facilities?
4. What kinds of signs, fencing, or education might help reduce these problems?

5. Do local law enforcement or land managers respond effectively when issues arise?
6. Are there specific facilities in your area where recreation pressure is becoming a bigger concern?
7. What would help protect these facilities while still allowing appropriate public access nearby?

Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) and Pesticides

The MAHA movement has brought welcome attention to our food supply and a renewed emphasis on consuming healthy foods. At the same time, it has also brought scrutiny to many common and scientifically proven agricultural practices, including pesticide use.

In the 2026 General Session, UFBF, with help from our legislative allies, was able to prevent passage of H.B. 456, Pesticide Amendments, which would have banned many common pesticides within 1,000 feet of schools. That setback was arbitrary and not based on sound science, and it would create serious challenges for farmers and applicators without clearly improving public health outcomes.

Pesticides remain an important tool for producing affordable, safe, and abundant food. Farmers depend on science-based regulation, label compliance, training, and integrated pest management to protect crops, workers, and neighboring communities. When policy is developed without that balance, it can create unnecessary burdens on agriculture and reduce the tools producers need to manage pests effectively.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you seen increased concern in your area about pesticides or pesticide use near schools and neighborhoods?
2. How can agriculture better explain the role of pesticides in safe and affordable food production?
3. What kinds of outreach or education would help the public better understand pesticide regulation and use?

Livestock Destruction and Vandalism

Livestock destruction and vandalism remain a serious concern for Utah farmers and ranchers. Recent cases in rural areas have highlighted the toll this takes on producers, including animal losses, crop losses, property damage, and emotional strain on families and communities.

Photo Credit: Rayna Reber

UFBF has been active in combating these crimes, offering rewards for information leading to arrests and convictions, and working closely with industry partners and UDAF to investigate and prosecute

offenders. These efforts aim to deter future incidents and support affected producers through swift response and accountability.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you or producers in your area experienced livestock destruction/theft or property vandalism recently?
2. What challenges do you face in reporting these incidents or working with law enforcement?
3. How effective do you think current reward programs are in preventing or solving these crimes?
4. What is the best way to spread the word about Farm Bureau rewards and UDAF support to reach more farmers and ranchers?
5. How can Farm Bureau and UDAF improve coordination with local sheriffs on crop and livestock protection?
6. What messaging would encourage producers to report suspicious activity quickly?
7. Are there community or media channels that could help amplify anti-vandalism efforts?
8. What additional support would help farmers and ranchers recover from crop and livestock loss incidents?
9. Is technology available/affordable to help in monitoring? Can farms access this technology?

Carbon Credits

Carbon credits are a market-based tool that can create an additional revenue stream for farm and ranch owners who adopt practices to reduce carbon emissions or store carbon in the soil. On working lands, that can include improved grazing management, cover crops, reduced tillage, and other soil-health practices that may also improve forage production, water retention, and drought resilience.

The Three Creeks grazing project in Rich County shows how a landscape-scale grazing strategy can support both ranch productivity and emerging carbon-credit opportunities. By consolidating multiple allotments into a more flexible system and using rest-rotation grazing, the project gives rangelands more recovery time while focusing on vegetation, soil health, and water quality. Because it also tracks indicators such as soil carbon, infiltration, microbial activity, and forage response, the project is well positioned to evaluate whether improved grazing can build soil health in ways that may qualify for carbon markets. If successful, carbon credits could help offset costs such as fencing, management changes, and verification while providing additional revenue to producers and rewarding practices that strengthen the long-term productivity of the ranch.

In the 2026 General Session, Rep. Troy Shelley sponsored H.B. 185, Carbon Credit Amendments, a bill to establish a state framework for carbon credit programs. UFBF worked closely with the sponsor to revise the legislation, which reflects growing interest in creating clearer rules around participation in these markets.

While carbon credits hold important potential, including real potential for extra revenue, there are also legitimate concerns that deserve attention, including long-term contract obligations,

verification costs, future land-use limitations, and the risk that weak market design could undermine program integrity if credits become oversupplied. For that reason, this is an area where UFBF may want to develop clear policy that supports producer participation while protecting flexibility and private property rights.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you looked into carbon credit programs as a potential revenue source for your operation?
2. Should Farm Bureau develop formal policy on carbon markets, and what should it include?
3. What education or resources would help farms and ranches get started with carbon credits safely?

Livestock Guardian Dogs

Livestock guardian dogs are essential for protecting sheep, goats, cattle, and other livestock from predators. As public recreation increases and more people encroach on working agricultural lands, conflicts between these dogs and trail users, campers, or neighbors are becoming more common. These dogs are often large, vocal, and protective by design, and harassment or provocation can lead to dangerous encounters for both people and animals.

While guardian dogs provide an effective, non-lethal alternative to other predator control methods, some situations have raised questions about public awareness and legal protections. UFBF is monitoring these incidents to determine whether additional policies are needed to protect working dogs that are provoked or harassed while actively guarding livestock.

Photo Credit: Phoebe Bean

Discussion Questions

1. Have you experienced conflicts between livestock guardian dogs and public recreationists on or near your operation?
2. What kinds of encounters have you seen between guardian dogs and trail users or neighbors?
3. Are current laws sufficient to protect working guardian dogs when they are provoked or threatened?
4. What messaging would help the public understand that these dogs are working animals, not pets?
5. Have local law enforcement been responsive when guardian dogs or livestock are harassed?

Final Reminder

As a reminder, the topics and discussion questions in the packet are meant to stimulate discussion and help identify issues important to agriculture. During Spring Issue Surfacing Meetings, your input is crucial in shaping UFBF's policy positions and advocacy efforts for the coming year. Please participate and bring forward any topic or ideas you want to have considered. Our 2026 UFBF Policy Book can be found under the "Policy & Action" tab of our website or by clicking here.

If you have any questions regarding UFBF policy, the 2026 General Session of the Utah Legislature, any federal government issues, or this packet, please contact a member of our policy team using the contact information below.

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