Utah Farm Bureau Federation Legislative Update

November 17, 2026

Legislative Interim Update

The Utah Farm Bureau policy team hopes you are enjoying the beautiful fall and harvest season. We enjoyed visiting with members across the state at county Farm Bureau annual business meetings. These conversations are vital as we prepare for the 2027 legislative session and work to ensure agriculture's voice is heard by policymakers as they make decisions that affect our industry.

October's legislative interim meetings included discussions on wildfire recovery, forest management, groundwater, Great Salt Lake, public lands, water rights, and state and federal responsibilities. These issues will continue to be discussed during the upcoming session, and we will work with legislators and state agencies to ensure agricultural interests are represented.

Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environmental Quality Appropriations Subcommittee Meeting

The Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environmental Quality Appropriations Subcommittee met October 20 to review agency budgets, performance measures, and several ongoing projects. The meeting included discussions on off-highway vehicle funding, Great Salt Lake projects, and air quality monitoring.

Off-Highway Vehicle Funding and Accountability

The subcommittee received a performance audit of the state's off-highway vehicle (OHV) program. The audit examined concerns about increasing law enforcement expenses and whether those costs were affecting funding for trail maintenance and other recreational uses.

The audit found that OHV law enforcement costs increased by 185% between 2021 and 2026. However, much of the increase was attributed to improved cost tracking, additional rangers, and higher salaries rather than reduced trail maintenance funding. Trail maintenance funding continues to increase, including additional ongoing appropriations approved during the 2026 legislative session.

The audit also identified a gap between snowmobile registration fees and the actual cost of grooming trails. Utah's snowmobile registration fees are approximately half those in neighboring states such as Colorado and Idaho. The Division of Outdoor Recreation will continue working with the Legislature on options for addressing those costs.

For agriculture, maintaining access to public lands and ensuring responsible OHV use remain important. Ranchers and other public land users depend on roads and trails to reach grazing allotments, manage livestock, and conduct their operations. Clear accountability and communication about how these funds are used are important to maintaining those operations.

Great Salt Lake and Water Projects

The subcommittee also reviewed several ongoing funding items, including the Cove-East Fork Virgin River Watershed Project, the Great Salt Lake split-season lease program, and Great Salt Lake aquifer restoration. These projects are part of the state's broader efforts to address water availability, watershed health, and Great Salt Lake surface elevations.

Air Quality and Dust Monitoring

The Division of Air Quality provided an update on the state's dust monitoring network. The research is intended to better understand the frequency and intensity of dust events, where the dust originates, its composition, and potential health and other impacts.

The state is expanding monitoring capabilities at existing air quality sites and has added mobile monitoring through electric buses and TRAX trains. The additional equipment will help researchers better identify dust sources and understand how conditions change across the Wasatch Front. The Division noted an increase in dust-impacted days in Salt Lake County as Great Salt Lake elevations decline and precipitation varies. However, the monitoring data that was discussed at the meeting has not shown dust exceeding federal health standards. Wildfire smoke was also identified as a concern, particularly for rural areas affected by this year's fires.

Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Interim Committee Meeting

The Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Interim Committee met October 21. The committee reviewed Utah's state water policy and considered several draft legislative proposals involving water management and precipitation capture. Members also received updates on the state's water year and 2026 wildfire season.

State Water Policy

The committee completed its annual review of Utah's state water policy under Utah Code Section 73-1-21. The policy establishes the state's objectives for adequate, reliable, affordable, sustainable, and clean water resources.

Previous amendments have addressed aquifers, telemetry, groundwater, saved water, watershed monitoring, state water planning, and regionally appropriate water use. The annual review gives legislators an opportunity to consider whether changes are needed to the priorities or balance of the state's water policy.

Precipitation Capture and Storage

The committee also discussed draft legislation sponsored by Rep. Troy Shelley addressing the capture, storage, and use of precipitation. The proposal generated questions about how capturing precipitation would fit within Utah's existing water laws and the state's authority over water.

Committee members raised concerns about how the proposal could affect existing water rights and the state's approach to water ownership. The discussion also touched on existing requirements that certain developments retain stormwater rather than allowing it to flow into the natural watershed features.

The sponsor agreed to continue discussions before advancing the proposal. Water law is complicated, and changes involving precipitation capture could have unintended consequences for downstream water users and existing water rights. Utah Farm Bureau will continue to monitor this proposal carefully.

2026 Wildfire Season

The committee also received an update on Utah's 2026 wildfire season. The state experienced 1,241 wildfires (682 natural) that burned approximately 560,795 acres. Six people supporting firefighting operations lost their lives, including four federal wildland firefighters and two pilots. The estimated statewide cost of fighting the fires across state, local, and federal agencies reached approximately $253 million.

The financial impacts of this year's fires extend well beyond fire suppression costs. Damage to watersheds, roads, culverts, water systems, grazing lands, livestock operations, and rural communities can create significant long-term costs.

Drought Conditions and Water Year Report

The committee received an update from the Division of Water Resources on Utah's drought conditions and the recently completed water year. Despite starting the water year with relatively strong reservoir storage, the state experienced an exceptionally poor snowpack and runoff season. Statewide average reservoir storage declined to an average of approximately 47% by the end of the water year, with even greater declines in southern Utah. Several reservoirs that typically provide storage over multiple years were also drawn down. The Division reported that the state began using reservoir storage earlier than normal and continued relying on it longer throughout the summer.

Low snowpack and warm winter temperatures contributed to significant stress on vegetation and rangelands. These conditions affected agricultural producers statewide and contributed to the difficult wildfire season. The Division noted that water users generally did not increase their consumption despite the dry conditions, which was encouraging. Although the state received some fall precipitation, the Division emphasized that Utah remains dependent on winter snowpack and that the outlook for the coming year remains uncertain.

Legislative Water Development Commission Meeting

The Legislative Water Development Commission met October 22 to consider several water-related legislative proposals and receive an update on groundwater conditions in the Bountiful Sub-Area of the East Shore Area aquifer.

Groundwater Management Amendments

Rep. Rex Shipp presented draft legislation addressing groundwater management plans and water rights that have had an extended period of nonuse. The proposal was reviewed by a working group, which recommended changes to the draft bill.

The current proposal encourages voluntary meetings among groundwater users in an affected area to work through potential water right conflicts arising from nonuse of a water right. It also outlines a process for a junior water right holder to file a complaint with the State Engineer when a senior water right holder has exceeded the statutory period of nonuse.

The proposal generated discussion about protecting existing water rights, the role of the State Engineer, and the potential consequences for agricultural water users. Rep. Shipp said he wanted to discuss the present bill draft with his constituents and Commission members agreed that additional work and stakeholder input were needed before moving forward. This is an important issue for agriculture, and we appreciated the commission's careful consideration of the proposed changes. Utah Farm Bureau policy supports the prior appropriation system, so changes like the one proposed must be considered very thoughtfully.

Water Rights Restricted Account Amendments

Rep. Carl Albrecht presented draft legislation to expand the authorized uses of the Water Rights Restricted Account.

The account was originally established to fund water rights adjudication. However, the Division of Water Rights found that the amount it can spend on adjudication is limited by factors outside the division's control. Meanwhile, the Legislature is placing increased emphasis on water measurement, data collection and analysis, and additional funding is needed for staff work in these areas.

The proposal would allow existing funds in the account to also support water data collection, management, and analysis, as well as help retain technical staff. The discussion highlighted difficulties in recruiting and retaining engineers in regional offices. Rep. Albrecht specifically referenced a longstanding engineering vacancy in the Richfield office that affected the division's ability to complete water rights applications and technical reviews.

The proposal does not request additional funding. Instead, it would provide greater flexibility in using funds already appropriated to the account. The commission voted unanimously to advance the proposal as a committee bill.

Colorado River Authority Membership

The commission also considered draft legislation to add representation for the Uinta Basin on the Colorado River Authority of Utah.

The proposal recognizes the Uinta Basin's significant contribution to Utah's Colorado River system. Rep. Scott Chew noted that approximately 63% of Utah's portion of the Colorado River volume originates in Uintah and Duchesne counties, with Daggett County also contributing. The proposal would give these local water interests additional representation in statewide Colorado River decisions.

The commission unanimously approved the proposal as a committee bill. Utah Farm Bureau supports agricultural and local water interests throughout the Colorado River Basin having a meaningful voice in decisions affecting the state's water resources.

Water Transfers

The commission also considered draft legislation proposed by Rep. Doug Owens addressing the transfer of water interests and the relationship between water company shares and water rights conveyances.

The proposal responds to confusion in litigation over the legal distinction between water rights and a share in a water company. The State Engineer and Utah Farm Bureau identified the issue after questions arose about how these interests should be treated when property changes hands.

Warren Peterson participated in the discussion on behalf of Farm Bureau and irrigation company shareholders. Clarifying how these interests are treated matters to agricultural landowners and irrigation companies because water interests are often closely tied to the ownership and operation of agricultural property.

Bountiful Sub-Area Aquifer Study

The commission received a detailed presentation from the South Davis Water District on groundwater conditions in the Bountiful Sub-Area of the East Shore Area aquifer.

The district reported an estimated annual groundwater deficit of approximately 4,400 acre-feet. Current pumping exceeds the estimated sustainable extraction rate, raising concerns about declining groundwater levels, land subsidence, and saltwater intrusion.

The presentation also highlighted the role imported irrigation water plays in replenishing the aquifer. Historically, water delivered from the Weber River infiltrated through local soils and contributed to groundwater recharge. Changes in irrigation practices, drought-related reductions in water deliveries, increased development, and more efficient irrigation systems have reduced the amount of return flow reaching the aquifer.

The district estimated that secondary irrigation contributes approximately 24% of aquifer recharge. It also raised concerns that further reductions in secondary irrigation, combined with expanded metering, could further reduce recharge, potentially decreasing annual recharge by an estimated 630 to 950 acre-feet.

The presentation also highlighted concerns about saltwater intrusion, including instances where newly drilled wells encountered brackish water and had to be sealed.

The State Engineer indicated that additional groundwater studies are planned, including work with the Utah Geological Survey and other partners. The study will examine groundwater movement, water use, sustainable pumping levels, and potential management options.

This discussion is particularly important for agriculture because irrigation practices can serve purposes beyond delivering water to crops, such as contributing to groundwater recharge. As Utah considers additional water efficiency and metering requirements, it is important to understand local conditions and potential unintended consequences before making policy changes.

Federalism Commission Meeting

The Federalism Commission met October 22 and heard from representatives of Utah's congressional delegation, state agencies, and local government. Discussions focused on federal and state responsibilities, wildfire mitigation, public lands management, and the potential impacts of federal funding reductions.

Wildland Urban Interface and Wildfire Mitigation

Acting Director Brianne Emery of the Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands presented the state's new high-risk Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) map, developed pursuant to H.B. 48, Wildland Urban Interface Modifications.

The map identifies areas of Utah at the highest risk where human development meets or intermingles with undeveloped wildlands. Approximately 60,000 structures fall within the identified high-risk areas. The state plans to use the map to help prioritize mitigation work, coordinate with local governments, and identify opportunities to leverage state and federal resources.

The division will also offer homeowners assessments to identify specific steps they can take to reduce wildfire risk on their properties.

The discussion provided an opportunity to revisit the severity of Utah's 2026 wildfire season and the need to improve coordination between state and federal agencies. Committee members emphasized that the financial impacts extend well beyond fire suppression. Damage to watersheds, roads, culverts, water systems, grazing lands, livestock operations, and rural communities can create significant long-term costs.

The state is working with the U.S. Forest Service through a cooperative agreement signed in January. This agreement provides opportunities for state agencies to assist with projects on federal lands when the work benefits state and private lands. Post-fire rehabilitation is one example of this cooperation.

The commission discussed the need for more forest thinning, fuel reduction, and other preventative work rather than continuing to bear the much higher direct and indirect costs associated with catastrophic fires.

H.B. 546 and Public Lands Management

The commission also received an update from the Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office on implementation of H.B. 546, Public Lands Duty of Care Amendments.

The legislation directs the office to identify and map landscape-scale public lands and establish mapping layers addressing specific natural resource and management criteria. It also requires the identification of landscape public nuisance areas in forested portions of these lands, with assistance from the Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands.

The presentation discussed the state's efforts to identify areas of concern and work with federal land management agencies to address issues involving forest health, mineral resources, access, and other

public land management priorities. One example involved forested areas within roadless designations where existing roads could provide access for forest management and restoration work.

2026 Election Results and the 2027 Legislature

Utah voters went to the polls November 3, and the results will bring significant changes to the Utah Legislature.

As of November 12, unofficial results show Republicans retaining control of both chambers, but with a smaller majority in the House of Representatives. Republicans are expected to hold 45 of the 75 House seats, compared to 28 Democrats and two unaffiliated members. As a result, Republicans will no longer hold a two-thirds supermajority in the House. In the Senate, Republicans are expected to hold 21 of 29 seats, with Democrats holding eight. Several legislative races were closely contested, and the results remain subject to the state canvass.

The election will also bring a sizable freshman class to the Capitol. Based on current unofficial results, approximately 24 new members are expected in the House and seven in the Senate, bringing the total to about 31 incoming legislators.

This presents both a challenge and a significant opportunity for Utah Farm Bureau. With so many new faces in the Legislature, we have an opportunity to introduce incoming members to agriculture and the issues facing Utah's farm and ranch families. Many will represent districts with agricultural operations, public lands, rural communities, and water. Building relationships early and helping new legislators understand agriculture's importance to Utah's economy and way of life will be an important part of our work heading into the 2027 session.

Legislators in the majority also chose their leadership teams. Rep. Mike Schultz will continue serving as Speaker of the House. Rep. Casey Snider was selected as House Majority Leader, Rep. Candice Pierucci as Majority Whip, and Rep. Cal Roberts as Majority Assistant Whip.

In the Senate, Sen. Evan Vickers of Iron County was selected to serve as Senate President. Sen. Chris Wilson will serve as Majority Leader, Sen. Michael McKell as Majority Whip, and Sen. Keven Stratton as Majority Assistant Whip.

Utah Farm Bureau looks forward to working with returning and newly elected legislators to advance policies that support agriculture, protect private property rights, maintain access to public lands, and recognize the importance of water to Utah's agricultural industry.

110th Utah Farm Bureau Annual Convention

The Utah Farm Bureau Federation will hold its 110th Annual Convention **November 18-20** at the Utah Valley Convention Center in Provo.

This year's theme is **"Stewarding Land, Leaders, and Legacy."**

The convention brings together Farm Bureau members from across Utah to discuss policy, share ideas, and help shape our organization's priorities for the coming year. Members will have opportunities to participate in policy discussions, leadership development, committee meetings, and other activities.

The policy process is especially important as we prepare for the 2027 legislative session. County Farm Bureau resolutions help establish the positions that guide our work at the Capitol and ensure Utah's farmers' and ranchers' concerns are reflected in our legislative priorities.

We look forward to seeing everyone in Provo and appreciate the time and effort our county Farm Bureaus put into this process.

Next Meetings

The next Interim Session is scheduled for **November 17-19**. Several committees will meet during this final round of interim meetings as legislators prepare for the 2027 General Session, which begins January 19.

You can find meeting agendas, materials, and recordings by visiting le.utah.gov.

As always, we encourage you to contact the Utah Farm Bureau policy team with questions or concerns about issues affecting your operation or community. We also encourage you to read through the 2026 Utah Farm Bureau Policy Book, available under the policy section of our website, or by scanning the QR code below. We also encourage you to mark your calendars for **Friday, February 5, for Utah Farm Bureau Day on the Hill.**

Terry Camp
(801) 718-2769
terry.camp@fbfs.com

Wade Garrett
(435) 660-9292
wade.garrett@fbfs.com