



Legislative Update

October 20, 2026

Legislative Interim Update

The Utah Farm Bureau policy team wishes you a wonderful fall and a successful harvest season. We've enjoyed connecting with members at annual business meetings across the state and hearing firsthand about the issues that matter most to you and your communities. Those conversations help shape our priorities as we prepare for the upcoming legislative session.

The Utah Legislature met for interim meetings in August and September. Discussions covered water, wildfire, data centers, public lands, food donations, and other issues affecting agriculture.

August Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environmental Quality Appropriations Subcommittee Meeting

On August 18, the Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environmental Quality Appropriations Subcommittee received an update from the Colorado River Authority of Utah on the federal government's post-2026 Colorado River framework. The Authority emphasized that the situation on the river remains serious, with water levels in both Lake Mead and Lake Powell at historically low elevations.

The federal framework provides for annual Glen Canyon Dam releases between 5 million and 12 million acre-feet based on the actual elevation of Lake Powell on October 1. It also gives the Secretary of the Interior increased flexibility to release water from upstream reservoirs, including Flaming Gorge. Utah is concerned that any releases from Flaming Gorge must actually protect Lake Powell elevations and should not simply provide additional water for Lower Basin use.

The framework could allow the Lower Basin to face reductions of up to 3 million acre-feet per year during the worst hydrologic conditions. It also allows up to 200,000 acre-feet per year of voluntary conservation among the Upper Basin states. Utah supports the voluntary nature of conservation efforts but wants to ensure that Utah receives credit for water conserved and delivered to Lake Powell.

The subcommittee also discussed the significant federal funding that could become available for water conservation. Utah expects more federal funding to be available over the funding period, although the exact amount remains uncertain. The Colorado River Authority of Utah expects to request additional state funding and staff resources to administer its program. Utah's existing \$5 million investment in its conservation program has helped position the state to receive federal funding and has been recognized by the Bureau of Reclamation as a successful effort.

Wildfire was another significant topic before the subcommittee. Incoming Utah Department of Natural Resources Commissioner, Jamie Barnes, reported that Utah had experienced more than 500,000 acres burned during the 2026 fire season, including approximately 215,000 acres from human-caused fires.

The Cottonwood Fire alone destroyed approximately 184 structures and burned 97,464 acres. The Widemouth and Babylon fires each burned more than 100,000 acres.

Legislators discussed the effects of wildfire beyond the immediate cost of fighting fires. Members noted that burned watersheds can create significant long-term impacts on communities, including flooding and damage to culinary water systems. Legislators also touched on the need for proactive forest management, including timber sales, fuel reduction, and fire breaks, rather than relying primarily on suppression after fires begin. These challenges especially affect rural Utah communities and agricultural producers whose operations depend on healthy watersheds and reliable water infrastructure.

The subcommittee also reviewed draft accountable budget recommendations for the Division of Water Resources and other water-related agencies. Recommendations included improving strategic planning and policy development, reworking outdated statutory and budget structures, clarifying the relationship between the Division of Water Resources and Utah Waterways, and improving performance measures. The Division of Water Resources generally supported the recommendations but expressed concern about reducing staff while its workload continues to grow because of new legislative programs and responsibilities, including secondary water metering.



(Photo Credit: Terry Camp)

August Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Interim Committee Meeting

On August 19, the Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Interim Committee focused heavily on data center policy and the potential environmental impacts of large data center developments in Utah.

The Division of Air Quality explained that existing air quality authorities regulate data centers, primarily because of fossil fuel combustion used for permanent or emergency power. Large projects may require substantial on-site generation, and the Division evaluates emissions, available controls, and potential impacts through its permitting process. The Division noted that modern controls can significantly reduce emissions, but large facilities can still produce substantial emissions and can consume a significant portion of a particular area's available air quality capacity.

The Division of Water Quality explained that it does not have a separate permitting system specifically for data centers. Instead, it regulates data centers through existing water quality, groundwater, wastewater, construction, and other permitting programs. Requirements are adapted to the location and characteristics of each project. The Division emphasized the importance of early coordination among state and federal agencies and transparent public participation.

The Division of Water Rights also provided an update on [H.B. 76, Data Center Water Transparency Amendments \(Rep. Koford/Sen. Sandall\)](#), which took effect July 1. The legislation requires certain large data centers beginning operations after July 1 to provide preconstruction notification and annual water-use reporting. Water-use information will be made publicly available, while proprietary information submitted to the state will remain protected.

The Division of Wildlife Resources discussed the potential impacts of data centers on wildlife, particularly because many proposed facilities are located on large areas of undeveloped land in rural areas. Potential impacts include direct mortality during construction, habitat loss and fragmentation, and degradation from heat, light, noise, and invasive species. The Division emphasized that impacts are site-specific and that its role is to provide recommendations and mitigation strategies rather than approve or deny private development projects.

For agriculture, the discussion reinforced the importance of evaluating data center development in the context of Utah's limited water and energy resources, rural land use, and local community impacts. Utah Farm Bureau will continue to monitor data center proposals and policy discussions, with particular attention to agricultural water supplies, energy costs, farmland conversion, local government authority, and meaningful public participation. We also encourage county Farm Bureaus to discuss policies related to data centers at annual business meetings.

August Legislative Water Development Commission Meeting

The Legislative Water Development Commission met August 20 and discussed several issues that could affect Utah water policy in the coming legislative session, including groundwater management, Colorado River representation and funding, watershed council coordination, and water infrastructure needs.

Groundwater and Water Rights Prioritization

At the meeting, [Rep. Rex Shipp](#) raised concerns about groundwater basins where existing water rights exceed available water supplies. In Iron County, for example, the aquifer currently produces about 28,000 acre-feet annually while recharging at about 21,000 acre-feet, creating a 7,000-acre-foot annual deficit. The area also has approximately 50,000 acre-feet of allocated water rights, although much of that water is not currently being used. The State Engineer explained that groundwater management plans could require curtailment of junior water rights if basins are not brought back to safe yield. Rep. Shipp is exploring legislation concerning the priority of water rights that are not being put to beneficial use. Committee members recommended additional review through the Water Task Force and input from the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, Farm Bureau, and other agricultural stakeholders because of its potential effect on existing water practices and legal due process and taking concerns.

Colorado River

The Commission received an update on the federal framework for Colorado River operations following the post-2026 negotiations. The discussion emphasized the severity of current hydrologic conditions and the limitations on how much water can realistically be delivered from the Upper Basin. Lake Powell releases are expected to operate within a broad range based on reservoir conditions, with federal officials balancing downstream water deliveries with the need to protect Lake Powell infrastructure. The Commission also discussed releases from Flaming Gorge, which could reach 1 million acre-feet through April 2027 under current conditions.

Colorado River Authority Representation

The Commission unanimously supported adding another seat representing the Uinta Basin to the Utah Colorado River Authority. The proposal aims to provide additional representation for the Duchesne and Uintah County area and other parts of the Uinta Basin that drain into the Colorado River system. The discussion noted that a significant share of Utah's Colorado River contribution originates in the area and that State Engineer data show a concentration of consumptive use in Duchesne and Uintah counties.

Utah Watershed Councils

The Utah Watershed Council presented its annual report and legislative priorities. The local councils are by statute local, volunteer organizations focused on planning, coordination, collaboration, and community engagement rather than regulation, project funding, or project management. The council reported that local watershed councils are now active statewide and have participated in the state water plan, Great Salt Lake Basin planning, water infrastructure planning, and educational site visits. The local watershed councils report plans and concerns to the Utah Watersheds Council and the state level, which in turn reports to the Legislature and Governor Cox.

The council identified several priorities for the coming year initiated at the local council level, including wildfire prevention and post-fire restoration, additional weather radar coverage, weather enhancement and cloud seeding, and better coordination between land-use planning and water resources. The council also requested legislative funding for staff to support local watershed councils, citing the need for planning and workload placed on existing Division of Water Resources staff and the volunteer nature of the local councils.

September Senate Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Confirmation Committee

On September 15, the Senate Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Confirmation Committee considered several appointments with direct connections to agriculture and natural resources. Hannah Freeze, a Box Elder County farmer who was serving as interim Great Salt Lake Commissioner, discussed the importance of bringing agricultural experience into Great Salt Lake policy. Hannah emphasized her practical knowledge of irrigation systems, canal companies, irrigation districts, water conservancy districts, prior appropriation, and water rights. The committee advanced her appointment to be the new Great Salt Lake Commissioner, replacing Brian Steed, to the full Senate and also recommended her for the Board of Water Resources. Hannah's experience working with agricultural producers and on agricultural water optimization will be valuable as Utah continues to address Great Salt Lake inflows and water needs.

The committee also considered Jamie Barnes's appointment as commissioner of the Utah Department of Natural Resources, replacing outgoing commissioner Joel Ferry. Barnes described more than 15 years of work with the Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands, including her leadership on forest management, wildfire response, and Great Salt Lake issues. She emphasized that effective stewardship depends on sound science, active management, and collaboration with local communities, agricultural producers, stakeholders, and federal partners. The committee unanimously recommended her appointment to the full Senate.

The committee also considered the nomination of Dave Evans of Duchesne County to serve on the Utah Conservation Commission. Dave is a third-generation cattle rancher and serves in a leadership role with the Duchesne County Farm Bureau. Evans described his cow-calf operation, hay production, and use of both flood and pressurized irrigation. He also highlighted his service with the Duchesne Conservation District and the Agricultural Advisory Board to the Colorado River Authority of Utah. Committee members recognized his work on behalf of agriculture and multigenerational involvement in the industry. The committee unanimously recommended his appointment to the Utah Conservation Commission for the full Senate's consideration.

September Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Interim Committee Meeting

At its September 16 meeting, the Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Interim Committee heard a presentation on Utah's wild horse and burro program. State and facility officials reported that Utah had an estimated population of 4,843 wild horses and burros on the range, compared with a population of about 1,956 animals as the carrying capacity for the range resources. Officials described how excess animals can damage rangeland and compete with livestock for forage and water. They said gathering animals and placing them through adoption, sale, or long-term holding remains central to the current program, but limited capacity and funding continue to constrain progress. Committee discussion highlighted ranchers' concerns about degraded range and the difficulty of securing affordable hay during drought.

The committee also discussed recovery of food that would otherwise be discarded and meat donations for use in programs that supply food to food-sharing programs. Rescue Food, a Utah nonprofit organization, described regulatory and liability barriers that prevent salvageable food from being made available to food banks or community members, or unsalvageable food waste from being made available to farmers for feed or to compost. Additionally, the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food reviewed the law allowing food banks to receive certain donated game meat and custom-processed beef, pork, and lamb. The meat must meet applicable conditions and is for end consumers, not for sale or barter. Meat provided to schools must be inspected under state or federal requirements. The department said it did not yet have data showing how widely the donation option is being used.

The committee also heard about challenges facing Utah's private aquaculture industry. State officials reported that the number of private facilities has declined, with fish diseases and aquatic invasive species creating significant costs and restrictions on sales. Disease testing, depopulation and disinfection requirements, and the lack of insurance or a federal indemnity program can make recovery difficult for small operations. Most sales are made out of state, where additional requirements may apply. The discussion highlighted the importance of implementing practical disease controls that protect wild fish and aquatic ecosystems, while allowing Utah producers to remain viable.

The committee also reviewed the Utah Food Systems Study, commissioned under [H.B. 510, Agricultural Amendments \(2025\)](#), to identify barriers and opportunities to increasing local food availability in Utah. The study found opportunities to strengthen local supply chains, expand direct-to-institution markets, strengthen workforce, provide additional working capital, and improve connections between producers and buyers. Recommendations included protecting agricultural land, investing in workforce development and agricultural education, and expanding processing, aggregation, cold storage, and distribution infrastructure. The study also identified a need for stronger agency program coordination, access to capital, and market development to help Utah producers expand local markets.

Agricultural burning was another topic. The Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands discussed questions about when agricultural burns are allowed and inconsistencies among statute, rule, and permitting practices, including how clearing-index thresholds apply. The committee's study item aims to clarify requirements which affect producers managing agricultural land and vegetation, and to consider recommended changes.

The committee also received a report, A Performance Audit of The Utah Beef Council ("UBC"), prepared by the Utah Office of the Legislative Auditor General. The discussion highlighted oversight and accountability for the council's use of beef-promotion funds. The audit included recommendations for UBC to prioritize measuring and reporting performance, report its performance to the Legislature, strengthen financial controls by reviewing its segregation of duties and updating its policies, and to adopt a long-term strategic plan.

September Legislative Water Development Commission Meeting

The Legislative Water Development Commission met again on September 17. The Commission heard a presentation on public water-system losses and the reliability of water-use data. The presentation explained that Utah's available estimates are incomplete and may not accurately reflect actual losses because meter accuracy is not consistently validated. Staff from the Division of Water Resources recommended regular water-loss audits and better verification of meter data. More reliable measurements can help communities make informed decisions about water supplies and infrastructure, which is important as Utah weighs competing water needs, including agriculture.

The Commission also received an update on phragmites, an invasive plant that consumes water that could otherwise contribute to Great Salt Lake inflows. The Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands estimates that phragmites deplete 82,000 acre-feet of water each year within the Great Salt Lake meander line. The presentation covered research evaluating the potential benefits of removal. The discussion highlighted how targeted phragmites management may support Great Salt Lake restoration while also requiring sustained mitigation efforts across affected areas. The discussion included successful removal of most phragmites around Utah Lake. The need for phragmites removal upstream from Great Salt Lake was also discussed extensively, with directions from the Commission chairs to report further at future meetings. We encourage county Farm Bureau organizations to engage with their local governments on this issue and continue to eradicate phragmites wherever it is found.

The Commission also received an update on efforts to reduce harmful algal blooms at Willard Peak Pond in Box Elder County. The presentation described excess phosphorus in pond sediments as a key driver of recurring blooms and discussed treatment intended to improve water quality. The broader

discussion underscored the importance of managing nutrients and protecting water quality in Utah's reservoirs and watersheds.

Next Meetings

The next Interim Session is scheduled for October 19-22. You can view the agendas for upcoming meetings by visiting le.utah.gov. As always, we encourage you to send your questions or comments to the policy team on topics of concern. 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.

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