



Legislative Update

November 15, 2024

Interim Update

October was a busy month with the policy team attending annual business meetings throughout the state. We loved seeing so many of you, hearing about policy success stories, and discussing the challenges your counties are facing. We are excited to see you at our annual convention next week to discuss county policy resolutions.

The Utah Legislature held Interim meetings on October 15 and 16. October Interim included meetings of both appropriations subcommittees and authorizing committees. On October 15, the Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environmental Quality Appropriations Subcommittee met to discuss budget reviews for various state divisions and agencies. Notably, the subcommittee reviewed a performance audit for the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA). The audit recommended ways for SITLA to improve its approach to risk management, enhance accountability in its decision-making, and adopt more proactive and comprehensive land management practices. You can read the audit from the Legislative Auditor General [here](#).

The subcommittee also reviewed a Water Development Coordinating Council Status of Funds Report. Utah faces significant water infrastructure challenges, with estimated needs of \$38.2 billion for drinking water and \$15 billion for water quality projects by 2060. In 2024, Governor Cox signed H.B. 280, updating the State Water Plan statute and creating a new Water Infrastructure Fund. The bill requires the development of a Unified Water Infrastructure Plan to rank and prioritize projects statewide. Two studies are mandated: one on consolidating existing water infrastructure funds, and another on a potential new fee to fund prioritized projects. The Water Development Coordinating Council must submit an annual report by October 1 each year on funds administered by relevant agencies. You can read the full 2024 report [here](#).

The Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment Interim Committee met on October 16. The agenda included several items of interest to Farm Bureau. First, the Committee discussed water reporting intent language. This language was proposed by the Interim Committee as an alternative to Rep. Ward's bill, H.B. 448, from the last General Session, which did not pass before the end of the session. H.B. 448 sought to require additional reporting from the Division of Water Resources on the state's water optimization efforts including the Agricultural Water Optimization Program, the use of water banks or other water marketing efforts, and the grant program for secondary water meters. The Committee directed the Division of Water Resources to monitor statewide legislative water optimization efforts, report the Division's findings to the Committee, and make the Division's findings available to the public on a website. You can read the full intent language [here](#).

At the same hearing, the Committee also listened to presentations on the Utah Veterinarian Education Loan Repayment Program. The Repayment Program, established in 2023 with a \$2.5 million allocation, aims to address veterinary shortages in specific areas of Utah. In its first year (FY24), the program received

16 applications, with applicants representing eight counties. The program initially offered a \$100,000 repayment after five years of qualifying service, but amendments in 2024 (H.B. 522) changed this to annual repayments of \$20,000. Qualifying practice types were also modified, removing USDA shortage areas and adding practices with at least 30% livestock medicine. The 16 applicants reported a total of \$2.6 million in loans, with an average balance of \$161,321. Five applicants were new graduates, and the average years in practice was 3.5. As of September 2024, no repayments had been made due to the program's first-year requirements, but the first repayments are expected in FY25. The Utah Department of Agriculture and Food is continuing to work on program implementation, including developing application forms, advertising the program, and processing certifications for qualifying veterinarians. Of note, Utah State University broke ground for its Veterinary Medical Education Building in May and the building is expected to be open in the summer of 2026.

The Committee also received a report on predator control measures from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR). The DWR touched on cougar and black bear harvest as well as coyote removal. With regard to cougars, DWR found that cougar harvest has increased in recent years and that there has been a higher proportion of females in the harvest, which is expected to lead to population declines. Regarding black bears, the new Utah Black Bear Management Plan was reviewed and updated in 2023. Black bear permit numbers will be reviewed, and recommendations will be submitted to the Utah Wildlife Board in January 2025, with an emphasis on identifying any areas where black bears may be having a negative impact on mule deer populations and ranching operations. Finally, DWR noted that in the coming year, they will propose increasing the bounty payment for coyotes by \$25 in crucial deer ranges. The goal is to encourage additional coyote removal in areas where deer are raising their fawns.

On October 28, the policy team joined a visit to Riley's Orchard in Genola with U.S. Rep. Burgess Owens and his staff. Discussions touched on processing capacity, grocery contracts, labor needs, and dust mitigation challenges from nearby sand and gravel operations. We are grateful to Rep. Owens for taking the time to get to know our Utah County fruit growers and understand the challenges they are facing.





As always, we encourage you to actively send our policy team questions or comments on topics of concern. We look forward to seeing you at the convention next week.

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