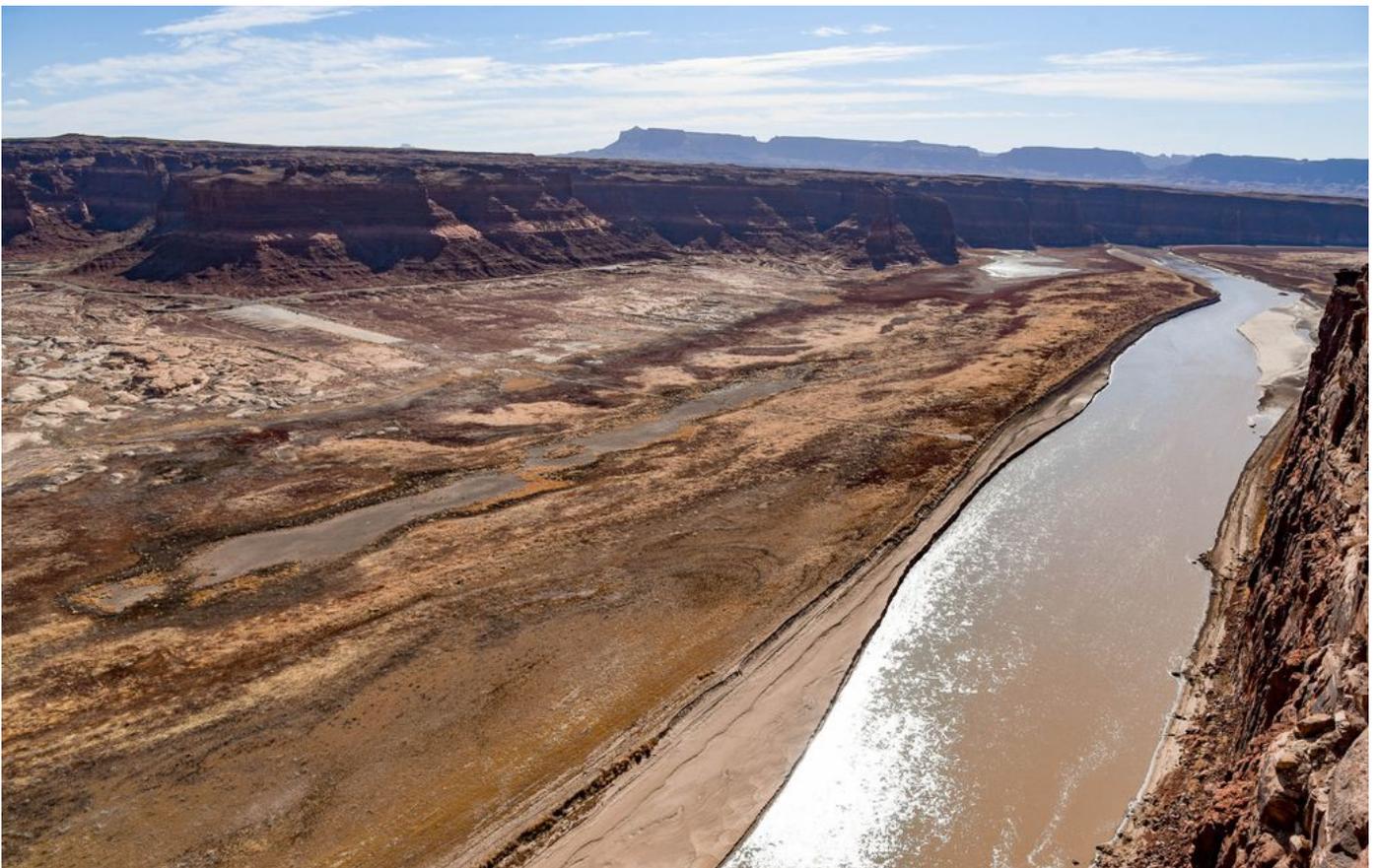


Conservation groups want feds to investigate water district's use of federal funds

The Central Utah Water Conservancy District used lobbying firm Finlinson & Finlinson, which nonprofits allege is conflict of interest.



The [Utah Rivers Council](#) and ten other Colorado River Basin organizations have requested a federal investigation into the use of federal funds by the [Central Utah Water Conservancy](#)

[District](#), or CUWCD.

CUWCD is the state's largest water supplier, and it has received more than \$800 million from Congress for the Central Utah Project (CUP), a water project which in part is geared toward promoting water conservation.

The organizations allege that over \$1 million in CUWCD funds has been given to private firm Finlinson & Finlinson, owned by the family of the CUWCD's Assistant General Manager Christine Finlinson. The firm has advocated for the [Lake Powell Pipeline](#) with members of the Utah state legislature, according to a letter sent to the Office of the U.S. Inspector General.

The Lake Powell Pipeline project would take water from the Colorado River and direct it through a [140-mile pipeline](#) to St. George. Critics contend Washington County can make do with its existing water resources if it embraces conservation, and there is concern the project would deplete an already over-allocated Colorado River. The Utah Rivers Council and other environmental groups oppose the pipeline.

"It's shocking the Central Utah Water District would look the other way while this \$1 million conflict of interest with its senior staff was in front of them for so many years," Utah activist Claire Geddes wrote in a press release distributed by the Council. "Since we can't trust this water agency, we need

a federal investigation to examine these conflicts of interest and whether CUP funding was used to advance the boondoggle Lake Powell Pipeline."

Lisa Anderson, Executive Assistant to the district's General Manager Gene Shawcroft, called the allegations "baseless" and said they were "entirely without merit," in a statement provided to the Tribune.

"The Central Utah Water Conservancy District complies with all federal reporting and auditing provisions of the Central Utah Project Completion Act (CUPCA) which expenditure reports are transparent to the public," Anderson wrote. "All federal appropriated funds have always been used solely to provide safe, clean, drinking water to the Wasatch Front, not for lobbying purposes."

This isn't the first investigation request the Utah Rivers Council has filed. On June 30, the group sent a letter to Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes's office requesting a statewide investigation into "the possible conflicts of interest among staff and contractors" of the district. CUWCD is a lobbying client of Finlinson & Finlinson, and the 19-page letter alleges that Christine Finlinson used her position in the CUWCD to advertise a program that would involve business with the firm.

Christine Finlinson told the Tribune that when she joined the

water district she severed her business associations with the company. According to Utah's public lobbyist database, [Finlinson's lobbyist ties with Finlinson & Finlinson](#) date back to 2013. The website claims she was first registered under the company on January 3, 2013, when she was also registered under the Southern Nevada Water Authority. The website states that her ties with Southern Nevada ended in August of 2015, but does not list an end date for her ties with Finlinson & Finlinson.

The Council's June 30 letter presents an email and an attachment the Utah Rivers Council says Finlinson sent to staff and board members of the CUWCD that discusses funding that would allow Central Utah to "maintain a very effective presence" in the state legislature. The government program, titled PREP 60, would include lobbying business for her husband, Fred Finlinson, according to the Council.

In the June 30 letter, the Council wrote that "these communications demonstrate that Ms. Finlinson played a direct role in the process of awarding the contract to the Finlinson Firm, to the personal benefit of Ms. Finlinson and her husband, including by encouraging the CUWCD Board of Trustees to award the contract to her family lobbying firm."

Finlinson told the Tribune that the CUWCD could pursue legal action against the Council for its accusations.

"I'm disappointed that the Utah Rivers Council, a nonprofit organization, would make claims that have no merit or foundation and include personally harmful accusations," she wrote in a statement.

The Attorney General's Office has not responded, Utah Rivers Council Executive Director Zach Frankel told the Tribune.

"We wanted to request this federal investigation because there's a substantial amount of federal funds that have gone to the same water agency," Frankel said. "We need to know what — if any — funds from the U.S. taxpayer have gone to advance the Lake Powell Pipeline."

Lake Powell Pipeline

Thursday's letter states that federal funds via the Central Utah Project being diverted to the Lake Powell Pipeline project would be inappropriate because, "this project is well outside the geographic scope of the Central Utah Project service area, and federal funds should not be used to advance a proposed water project that threatens other water users in the basin."

The groups also express grievances about the Lake Powell Pipeline project as a whole. The project would direct water to Washington County, an area where water use per person is

more than double the U.S. municipal average, the letter states. It also notes that Congress has directed the CUWCD to take on conservation measures with the 1992 Central Utah Project Completion Act, and that in its investigation, the Office of the U.S. Inspector General should also look into whether the CUWCD's "anti-conservation actions conflict with the legislative intent of CUPCA and subsequent congressional funding."

Kyle Roerink, the executive director of the Great Basin Water Network, another signee of Thursday's letter, wrote in the Council's press release that officials should be "vigilant" about making sure that U.S. taxpayer dollars are accounted for.

"Congressionally appropriated funds for CUWCD should not be spent pursuing a water-depleting, money-wasting boondoggle like the Lake Powell Pipeline," Roerink said. "Taxpayers and CUWCD customers have a right to know how Utah's water elites are spending their money."

The Council has reached out to the district in the past by email to attempt to voice their concerns but they did not engage, Frankel said.

"We're not going to waste time talking to the water district," Frankel said. "The water district showed zero interest."

Brian Maffly contributed reporting for this article.