

Utah wants to shore up its Colorado River share with a water ‘savings account’

By David Condos for KUER

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Summary

Utah is launching a Demand Management Pilot Program to incentivize water conservation in agriculture, aiming to create a “savings account” in Lake Powell. The program, costing \$4.4 million, will pay farmers to leave fields fallow and track the conserved water to ensure it reaches the reservoir. This initiative, while innovative, may not significantly impact ongoing Colorado River negotiations before 2026.

Coby Hunt's farm field near the southeast Utah town of Green River would normally be filled with alfalfa growing up to his knees.

This year, however, it was barren — pale gray dirt cracking under the late summer sun. The only green things were scraggly scraps of whatever accidental plants somehow survived without irrigation.



Photo caption: Farmer and rancher Coby Hunt stands next to idle irrigation equipment in one of his fields near the town of Green River, Aug. 19, 2024. Utah is launching a new program that will pay producers to leave their fields empty, as Hunt has done, and leave their irrigation water in the Colorado River system.

It wasn't a pretty sight for Hunt.

"It hurts," he said as he surveyed the desolate field. "But there's also a benefit of it looking like this, right?"

That benefit is taking the water he could have used to irrigate his land and leaving it in the nearby Green River, which flows to the increasingly strained Colorado River.

"There's only so many pieces of the pie you can pull out before there's no pie," he said. "Every little bit you can save adds more."

Across Utah, farmers are experimenting with ways to tighten their water use as agriculture, drought and population growth collide to put pressure on the state's limited water resources. Some are installing [more efficient irrigation](#) technology. Others are testing unconventional crops. In Hunt's case, he's taking some of his farmland out of commission entirely — for a time and for a price.



Photo caption: Coby Hunt points across the dam that diverts water from the Green River into the irrigation canal that runs by his field, Aug. 19, 2024. Because he's been paid to fallow that land, the water he would typically use on his crops has been returning to the Green River downstream. David Condos/KUER

For the past two years, Hunt has taken part in a [federal program](#) that pays farmers to temporarily leave their fields empty and lease the conserved water to the government. It's something that has been going on for years [across the Colorado River Basin](#).

Now, Utah is launching its version of that effort. The new multimillion-dollar plan incentivizes conservation and aims to do a better job of tracking that saved water in hopes of getting credit for it in future Colorado River dealings.

The practice of leaving a field idle for a season is called [fallowing](#), and Hunt conceded it's not for everyone.

"Some of the farmers don't like it. In fact, they don't like me for leasing my water."

Many don't want the feds involved in their business, he said, or worry the government might take their water permanently if they show they can get by without it. For farmers who grow other crops, like Green River's famed melons, he said it might not make financial sense to sit out a year and lose your customer base.

"But to me, if I can help with the problem — like with drought, if I can help with that — then I think that's a good thing," he said.

Hunt usually grows feed for the cattle he raises, so he's still had plenty to do while this 30-acre field sits empty. Fallowing has just meant he needs to buy hay from elsewhere.

He feels good about the amount of water it saves, too. His water right would typically allow him to use six acre-feet of water a year, he said — enough to cover Hunt and the acre he's standing on over his head. Because his fields are some of the last ones upstream from Lake Powell, it's easy to imagine the water he conserves making it to the reservoir.

That's why farmers like Hunt are vital to Utah's new effort to conserve more Colorado River water, called the [Demand Management Pilot Program](#). What's novel about it is how it will track and document the water savings.

"Eventually, our goal is to create a sort of savings account in Lake Powell or other reservoirs," said Lily Bosworth, an engineer with the Colorado River Authority of Utah, which is administering the pilot.

Then if the state needs to send extra water downstream to meet its future Colorado River obligations, Bosworth said it could pull from that Lake Powell savings account instead of forcing users to cut back. Utah is still in the process of making sure it can get credit for the program's saved water at both the regional and federal levels, she said.



Photo caption: An irrigation canal draws water from the Green River in southeast Utah, Aug. 19, 2024. Roughly three-fourths of all water used in Utah goes to agriculture. David Condos/KUER

Utah is putting \$4.4 million into the pilot over the next two years. Applications [opened](#) in mid-December, and the plan is for the first round of farmers to start conserving by the spring irrigation season.

Besides getting paid, Bosworth said the primary benefit for farmers is that they hold onto their water rights, avoiding the “use-it-or-lose-it” situations that have kept some from conserving in the past. A new [state code](#) in 2023 opened the door for farmers to apply with the Division of Water Rights to flag a portion of their water rights as conservation.

Utah’s Demand Management Program will follow that water downstream in two ways.

One is using regulations to distribute the saved water, Bosworth said. The state could enforce a target level of streamflow and step in to prevent other water rights holders from using that water between the field where it was conserved and the reservoir where the state wants it to go.

The other option would be to time when the saved water enters the system. The state could hold it in an upstream reservoir and then release it as a pulse after the irrigation season ends. Theoretically, that would mean there's less chance of another water right holder using it before it gets to its destination.

The program might require extra measurement tools along the river to track the saved water and make sure it's traveling downstream.

Utah's investment illustrates a big change, Bosworth said. "Recognizing that conservation is a beneficial use, to me, is a pretty big deal. That's a major shift in thinking about how we view water in Utah and in the West."

Of course, Utah's demand management program is happening during [tense negotiations](#) between the seven basin states over how to divvy up the shrinking Colorado River.

"Even though I definitely think it's innovative and a step in the right direction — like, the Upper Basin should be doing demand management — I'm not sure that it's going to immediately affect the post-2026 negotiations," said Elizabeth Koebele, an associate professor at the [University of Nevada Reno](#) who studies water policy.

Utah will be the first Upper Basin state to incentivize and track water conservation in this way, Koebele said, so it could serve as a model for Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico. If all four launch demand management programs, she thinks that could improve the Upper Basin's negotiating position with the Lower Basin states of California, Nevada and Arizona. She doesn't see that happening, though, at least not before current river agreements expire in 2026.

There's an inherent tension between saying "we can't cut our water use" and "we can do more conservation," Koebele said, and Utah and its neighbors are still generally pushing back against any future water cuts.

"It scares me when the rest of the Upper Basin states say, 'We're not going to play ball,' she said.

Eventually, Koebele said that could prompt a "[compact call](#)," where Lower Basin states force the Upper Basin to curb their water use. If Utah has a little extra water socked away in its reservoir savings account, that might help the state's situation, she said, but getting to that unprecedented point in the river negotiations would be risky.

As the West gets [hotter](#) and [drier](#), it's also unclear whether paying farmers not to farm is the best long-term solution.

"We're seeing this trend toward aridification that's undeniable in the Colorado River Basin," Koebele said. "In my perspective, we're never going to come up with enough money to compensate everyone for conservation on a permanent basis."

Especially with the coming change in presidential administrations, a lot of the federal money that's gone to pay farmers to conserve in recent years [could dry up](#). The demand management strategy, Koebele said, could help deal with short-term droughts and buy some time though.



Photo caption: Dry soil cracks in one of Coby Hunt's fallowed fields near Green River, Aug. 19, 2024. For years, the federal government has paid some Utah farmers to leave their fields empty as a way to keep more water in the Colorado River. Now, Utah is trying its own version of this — and changing how it keeps track of the water that's saved. David Condos / KUER

Just north of his fallowed field, farmer Coby Hunt stood on a platform overlooking the wide, rushing Green River.

It's a behemoth compared to most waterways in this parched part of southeast Utah. The town where his fields are gets just 6.5 inches of precipitation each year.

"The river is definitely our lifeline," he said, pointing out the spot where his irrigation canal draws from the river. "Without it, we'd be nothing."

Despite the hurdles facing the Colorado River, he hopes that what's happening in his field can be a small part of finding a solution to keep the water flowing.

"How can we make it work for everybody? How can we make people downstream happy," he asked. "You still gotta have farmers farming to feed everybody."

"It's a delicate thing. But I think if we all work together, we can figure it out."

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