

Gehrke: Utah needs good data before taxpayers dive headfirst into Lake Powell pipeline scam

We live in a desert, one of the driest states in the nation.

It's a line repeated so often that it's hardly questioned. And it's not wrong. Utah is, indeed, the second-driest state in the country. And one of the fastest growing.

So it's not unreasonable, as we look to the future, to ask some pretty fundamental questions: How much water do we use? How much will we need? And how much can we conserve?

Except despite years of working on it and lots of taxpayer money spent, an audit released Tuesday found once again that Utah water bosses can't even answer the most basic of those questions, how much the state currently uses.

They're getting closer, at least since an earlier audit in 2015 slammed the state's Division of Water Rights for what was, at the time, basically guesswork.

But knowing how much water Utahns are using should not only be the easiest to figure out, it is the most important, since it sets the baseline for every water decision we make as a state.

And, as you are probably aware, the state is considering some multibillion-dollar options — a pair of projects, the Bear River Project up north and the Lake Powell Pipeline to the south. Both have powerful political backing, even if, as Tuesday's audit shows, there really isn't the data to justify either.

Not only do we not know how much water we use, we don't know how much we are going to need. The 2015 audit, for example, notably pointed out that,

because less agricultural water is being used, the rate of growth may be slower than anticipated. Tuesday's report said water districts still don't have a good grasp of what that growth rate will look like and plans for three of the 11 river basins haven't been updated since the 1990s.

And districts have also been slow to implement really simple conservation measures, things like tracking how much their water systems leak or installing meters to track water use. Areas that have required metering of both primary and secondary connections have seen a 34 percent decrease in consumption.

That's right, 34 percent.

And many districts still haven't adopted a tiered pricing structure, where consumers who use a lot of water pay more for the excess use, even though the Legislature directed cities to implement tiered pricing in 2016.

The lack of conservation measures is even more significant because, according to data the state submitted to the federal agency reviewing the proposed Lake Powell pipeline, the average Washington County water user consumes 325 gallons a day, 120 gallons a day more than the average Las Vegas resident.

The audit was not all bad news. Progress is being made and we are getting closer to answers.

But we don't have them yet and good, thorough, reliable data is essential before water users and state taxpayers end up on the hook for projects that may be unnecessary and will have price tags the likes of which this state has really never seen before.

The Lake Powell project, for example, is officially estimated to cost in the neighborhood of \$1.8 billion — an estimate that is not only about half a billion dollars more than the state spent to rebuild Interstate 15, but an

estimate that is likely about half what the the pipeline would actually cost to build.

Look at the recently completed Southern Delivery System in Colorado. It came in at about \$1 billion and spans a third of the distance of the Lake Powell Pipeline, has about two-thirds the capacity and doesn't have to pump water up a 2,000-foot elevation gain to get it to its destination like the Lake Powell pipeline would.

The Bear River Project has a price tag that has steadily grown to its current \$2 billion projection.

It would fall to the state to finance the Lake Powell Pipeline, putting its spotless credit on the line, and water users would repay the debt. But an analysis of the repayment plan projects that water rates in Washington County would triple, impact fees would skyrocket and the county still couldn't pay off the the project.

Gov. Gary Herbert has said the right things when it comes to the Lake Powell pipeline. He has said we need better data, that we need to conserve more, and that the state needs to be very careful about taking on massive amounts of debt on dubious promises of repayment.

Then his water resources division plows ahead, seeking the regulatory approval for the project by the end of the year.

It's up to Herbert to bring some sanity to this process. There is no urgent need for these water projects, and the governor should hit the brakes on both, focus on conservation, gather the data and find out if the new pipelines are even needed before putting Utahns on the hook for billions of dollars.