

Rural Utah hopes for a piece of the state's nuclear ambitions

By Ethan Rauschkolb

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Photo caption: A semi truck travels west along Main Street and over the Green River at sunset in Green River, Utah, Aug. 18, 2024. David Condos / KUER

Utah has had a hand in nuclear development since the state's Uranium boom in the middle of the 20th century. But pushes from Gov. Spencer Cox, the hunger for [AI development](#) and a renewed federal interest are putting Utah at the forefront of a new nationwide [nuclear chase](#).

Paving the way forward are the rural counties that have defined the state's energy sector for decades.

Edward Castro Bennett, city manager for Green River, said the town currently hovers around a population of 900, and that's not growing anytime soon.

"We have more hotel beds than we do residential bedrooms in our town," Bennett said.

Nestled on its namesake river near the intersection of I-70 and state highway 191, Green River relies heavily on tourism to support its economy. That wasn't always the case. In the '70s, the city was home to a military base that tested [Cold War-era rockets](#). Bennett said this military presence helped Green River peak at around 3,000 people.

Bringing nuclear power to Green River could propel the city back to similar heights.

They have the infrastructure for it, he said, with a small regional airport for freight, proximity to interstate and rail lines, and access to land and water.

"There's no reason that a city like Green River does not become the energy hub of the Intermountain West."



Photo caption: A Valar Atomix microreactor is seen on a C-17 aircraft, without nuclear fuel, at March Air Reserve Base, Calif., Feb. 15, 2026. The reactor was transported from March Air Reserve Base to Hill Air Force Base in Utah.
Matthew Daly /AP

Rural Utah is already beginning to take advantage of the renewed interest in nuclear power. The United States military transported a small modular nuclear reactor to [Utah's Hill Air Force Base in mid-February](#), and it will ultimately be moved to the nearby [San](#)

[Rafael Energy Lab](#) in Emery County. The unit is part of the federal administration's [push](#) to bring new test reactors online by July 4, 2026.

State Sen. [Derrin Owens](#), whose district covers much of central and southern Utah, is excited to see the state taking steps in nuclear development.

He expects the industry to bring in high-paying, technical jobs for cities that take on nuclear projects, especially the rural communities he represents.

"I go from Santaquin south to the Arizona border, coal country and power country," Owens said. "We've lost a number of jobs, and so for me, that was a big motivator to try to do something that could benefit the people there."

He's been working on this plan for years. Owens said he's visited out-of-state facilities, brought in private companies to tour the state and talked with city leaders about what nuclear production might look like.

And, luckily for Owens, forces outside his control are starting to come together.

In 2024, the governor announced [Operation Gigawatt](#), his plan to increase statewide energy production and capacity. One of its key steps is to invest in nuclear research and development.

The following year, the federal government loosened regulations surrounding nuclear development to boost the industry. The Department of Energy [told NPR this year](#) that these changes would increase innovation. But the administration wasn't done trying to spur the industry.

One month into Utah's 2026 legislative session, the Department of Energy put out a request for states interested in hosting a Nuclear Lifecycle Innovation Campus. These sites, according to the agency, could support the entire nuclear chain, including fuel enrichment, processing and recycling.

Owens has written a bill, [SB153](#), to take advantage of the push from all sides. It would direct the Utah Energy Council to assess developing nuclear fuel recycling centers. Owens said Utah should be a top competitor for hosting one of these campuses. And to capitalize on Operation Gigawatt, the bill would direct the Utah Office of Energy Development to coordinate with public and private entities on developing nuclear energy.

"It's a great opportunity where things are starting to mesh together," Owens said.

The sign along the I-70 business loop that welcomes you to Green River, Utah, Aug. 18, 2024.

It was a team effort. Owens worked closely with energy office officials, including Director Emy Lesofski, to make sure the bill language was right.



Photo caption: The sign along the I-70 business loop. David Condos / KUER.

“SB135 authorizes OED to lead the coordination and planning of the entire fuel cycle,” said Lesofski, who is also an energy advisor to the governor. “This is a critical first step in determining if and where a site makes sense for Utah.”

The office has already started laying the groundwork. Bennett said Green River has talked with them about Utah’s nuclear future.

“Just three days ago, I met one of the deputy directors of OED, and we are in talks to figure out when to get them into Green River.”

He also said the renewed federal interest has raised some projects back from the dead.

“Everybody that had this land in Green River; they were just looking to liquidate it,” he said. “Cut [their] losses, and move them on to something else.”

Bennett said nothing is final, but it’s looking more likely that nuclear energy is coming to central Utah.

“Why not allow some of these smaller, economically depressed areas that have all of the things in place to make this happen? Why not come to us and say, OK, yeah, let's make this happen.”

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