

Kane County looking to dam the Virgin River in latest major project



After spending tens of millions on water development projects, Kane County water officials are looking to spend millions more, mostly from federal sources, in their latest plan to dam the Virgin River upstream of Zion National Park for the benefit of alfalfa growers.

The proposed Cove Reservoir would impound 6,000 acre-feet of water behind a 90-foot-high dam just west of Orderville. The Kane County Water Conservancy District

says the project also would provide much needed hydropower and recreation, while enhancing native fish habitat downstream, according to [an environmental assessment](#) posted Nov. 23.

The federal Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS, is accepting public comment through December on the \$30 million project with a public meeting scheduled Dec. 9.

The stated purpose is to “improve agricultural water management” to increase irrigation on 6,100 acres, mostly in neighboring Washington County, potentially increasing crop yields by 25%, or more than 6,000 tons of alfalfa a year.

[Utah Rivers Council](#) Executive Director Zach Frankel derided the 187-acre reservoir as “a project without a purpose” because, he contends, the water district has yet to demonstrate a need for this water or water from other costly projects the district has pushed, such as the [Lake Powell pipeline](#).

“We doubt their claims of [electrical] power needs hold any water. This project exemplifies wasteful government spending,” Frankel said. “The last time the Kane district built a dam, they desecrated scores of Native American gravesites and the federal government turned a blind eye to

the tribal concerns.”

The nonprofit accused the district’s general manager, Mike Noel, of repeatedly overstating its future water needs. The district does not serve the entire county but rather two small population clusters miles outside of Kanab. In his scoping comments for the environmental review, Frankel unsuccessfully asked the NRCS to conduct a full, more robust environmental impact statement that would take a hard look at the project’s purpose, potential impacts on archaeological resources that could be inundated, and what effect climate change will have on water availability.

The NRCS is to cover \$21 million of the costs, with the rest borne by the Kane and Washington county water districts and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

Since 1995, when Noel took over leadership of the water district, which currently serves 3,000 connections, it has developed \$166 million worth of water projects, he told lawmakers at a 2017 hearing. These projects include Utah’s last federally approved reservoir, Jackson Flat, which was built outside Kanab in 2011.

During the Jackson Flat construction, excavators turned up at least 32 sets of human remains dating back 1,000 to 1,200 years, according to then-State Archaeologist Kevin Jones.

"It was a giant can of worms from the get-go," Jones said. "There were elaborate, culturally meaningful burials in that area, but [the water district] looked at those things as impediments to their development. They saw those as problems to be dealt with, make them go away rather than give them respect."

One burial appeared to be a spiritual leader with each arm around the bodies of small children.

Jones had been called in to advise how to handle the disinterred remains in accordance with federal law, but his concerns were largely dismissed, he said. As a result, gravesites were damaged, and the human remains may not have been repatriated to the appropriate tribe.

Gov. Gary Herbert fired Jones and [Forrest Cuch](#), the director of the state Division of Indian Affairs, in 2011 after another dust-up over the handling of human remains and archaeological resources at construction sites.

(Photo courtesy of Natural Resources Conservation Service)
This basin in Utah's Long Valley near Orderville would be inundated by a proposed dam on a Virgin River tributary to impound water for alfalfa growers.

The construction plan for Cove Reservoir appears to be designed to avoid the missteps that occurred at Jackson

Flat. Work is to stop within a 100-foot radius of any spot where human remains are discovered and the Utah Division of State History and the NRCS would be contacted. The site would be secured while the remains are handled in accordance with the federal [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#). Construction would not resume until after the appropriate consultations have been completed.

“Construction personnel will be instructed to be observant for cultural/historic objects,” the environmental assessment states. “Training will be conducted by an archaeologist approved by NRCS.”

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

Cove Reservoir would store water during the summer months to be used by farmers who routinely experience shortages when flows on the Virgin’s East Fork are depleted.

“Irrigation water demand during this time is not being met by the current systems,” the assessment states. “Existing irrigation facilities have limited capabilities to divert water from the river, and there is currently no capacity for storage during non-use and high-flow periods. As a result, this water is not available to local users.”

The project would also generate power for Orderville and Glendale and would also support new opportunities for water-based recreation, such as fishing, camping and boating.

“This need is particularly evident during spring, summer, and fall,” the assessment explains. “The highly popular national and state parks are overcrowded and do not currently have the capacity to accommodate for the ever-increasing amounts of tourists frequenting the area.”

Downstream from Orderville is a 50-mile stretch on the Virgin River’s main stem that harbors two federally listed fish species, the Virgin River chub and the woundfin. The environmental review concluded the reservoir could help these endangered fish by improving summertime flows. Also benefiting would be the southwestern willow flycatcher, a federally listed migratory bird that relies on streamside habitat.

The plan also seeks to replace the inoperable Glendale hydropower station with a new one located on an existing diversion two miles downstream. It would generate between 200,000 and 540,000 kilowatt hours a year, mostly during the summer, supplementing the output from an existing station. Also proposed is a recreation area with a campground, pavilion and boat ramp.

While the dam would inundate private land acquired by the water district, the 4.3 million cubic yards of fill and riprap would come from borrow pits on federal land. As part of the project, the feds would approve a new 50-acre pit at Black Knoll on the Glendale Bench.