

Public asked to weigh in on proposed Cove Reservoir serving Kane, Washington counties

Written by Mori Kessler for St. George News | Sep 24, 2026 Updated Sep 26, 2026

A proposed 6,000-acre-foot reservoir in Kane County that would serve water users in both Kane and Washington counties is undergoing federal environmental review, with the public now being asked to weigh in on the project.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service released the draft environmental impact statement for the [Cove-East Fork Virgin River Watershed Project](#) in mid-September. The Kane County Water Conservancy District and Washington County Water Conservancy District are local sponsors.

The proposed reservoir would be built southwest of Orderville and store water for agricultural users in the Orderville and Mt. Carmel areas. Water would also be released downstream through the East Fork Virgin River for agricultural, municipal and industrial uses in Washington County.

Washington County Water Conservancy District officials say the project would provide another source of stored water as the district works to expand its water supplies and storage capacity.



Pictured is the proposed area for the Cove Reservoir in Kane County, west of Orderville, Kane County, Utah, date not specified. Photo courtesy of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, St. George News.

“Cove Reservoir benefits Washington County through increased water security, drought protection, economic stability and enhanced capacity to meet future demand,” Karry Rathje, the water district’s public affairs manager, said in a statement. “In a dry and rapidly growing desert community, reservoir storage is essential. The Washington County Water Conservancy District is pursuing multiple water storage projects, including additional reservoirs and storage tanks, to help ensure our community has a safe, reliable water supply now and in the future.”

The public can comment on the draft study through Nov. 2.

Comments can be emailed to CoveEFVR@usda.gov or mailed to Ammon Boswell, NRCS watershed program manager, 1950 W. Main St., Tremonton, UT 84337. Comments can also be submitted at the public meeting.

The preferred alternative calls for an off-stream reservoir southwest of Orderville with an approximately 1,900-foot-long earthen dam reaching a maximum height of about 90 feet. The project would also include spillways, pipelines, a booster pump station, access roads and a recreation area.

The project is estimated to cost about \$39.7 million, including approximately \$24.9 million in federal funding and \$14.8 million from nonfederal sources. The Utah Legislature [put \\$9 million toward the project](#) in 2024.

The project has faced objections since an earlier environmental assessment was released in 2020.

“The current plan is missing crucial information and many questions are unanswered,” Thomas Butine, then-board president of Conserve Southwest Utah, wrote during the earlier review. “Therefore, the conclusion in the Plan-EA that there is no significant impact of the project on the environment has no merit.”

After reviewing the project and public comments on that assessment, the Natural Resources Conservation Service moved to the more extensive environmental impact statement process [in October 2021](#).

Three of the recurring concerns have centered on the project’s agricultural purpose, effects on downstream river flows and potential impacts to environmental and cultural resources.

One concern has centered on the project’s agricultural purpose, particularly the amount of agricultural land in Washington County that would benefit from the project.



The Virgin River in Zion National Park is pictured, Utah, June 4, 2020.
Photo by Hollie Reina, St. George News

“The ‘agricultural’ lands in Washington County ... to receive project water are actually municipal in nature, with many subdivisions, schools, churches, and commercial development having already been constructed inside the project lands,” Zachary Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council, and six other environmental advocates [wrote in a letter](#) requesting an investigation by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Inspector General.

The groups estimated that roughly 900 acres of open land remained in the Washington County area they examined and questioned whether that land would remain agricultural or ultimately receive Cove Reservoir water.

The new draft study identifies both agricultural uses and municipal and industrial uses. Its economic analysis also separately considers agricultural water management, recreation and municipal and industrial benefits.



The new community garden at Staheli Family Farm allows residents to rent planter boxes and cultivate their own plants, Washington City, Utah, April 2, 2026. Photo by Jessi Bang, St. George News

A second concern involves what storing water upstream could do to the East Fork Virgin River.

American Whitewater has argued that capturing spring runoff could alter natural high flows, potentially affecting sediment movement, vegetation, aquatic habitat and downstream recreation.

The draft study includes additional modeling of water availability, reservoir operations and downstream flows. The study concludes changes to East Fork flows would be relatively minor. Project operations would also be required to comply with the 1996 Zion National Park Water Rights Settlement Agreement.

The draft also examines the river's Wild and Scenic River values downstream and concludes the project would not adversely affect those values if operated in accordance with the settlement agreement.

A third concern involves effects on wildlife, wetlands and cultural resources.



Earlier comments raised questions about threatened and endangered species associated with the Virgin River system, including the woundfin, Virgin River chub and southwestern willow flycatcher.

The new review includes a biological assessment examining those and other protected species. Federal determinations vary by species and location, ranging from no effect to findings that the project may affect – but is not likely to adversely affect – certain protected species or habitat.

The preferred alternative would also affect approximately 0.17 acres of wetlands and 0.21 acres of other aquatic features. Measures outlined in the draft include erosion and sediment controls, minimizing construction disturbance and restoring disturbed areas. Archaeological surveys identified 10 cultural sites within the project area, including four recommended as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The draft study determines the preferred alternative would have an adverse effect on historic properties. The environmental review includes consultation with the Utah State Historic Preservation Office, tribes and other agencies, along with measures addressing those effects.

Federal officials also considered a smaller 3,000-acre-foot reservoir and taking no action. Other potential reservoir locations were eliminated from detailed consideration because of factors including feasibility, cost, environmental impacts, safety concerns or an inability to meet the project's stated purpose.

Public comments must be submitted by Nov. 2 via physical mail or email to:
Ammon Boswell, Watershed Program Manager
1950 West Main Street, Tremonton, UT 84337
CoveEFVR@usda.gov