

Two County water managers view proposed Cove Reservoir as beneficial to both



A proposed reservoir project decades in the making moved another step towards reality Wednesday night as water managers fielded questions from the public about potential impacts to consumers and the environment in both Washington and Kane Counties.

The [Cove Reservoir](#) project aims to divert water from the East Fork of the Virgin River near Orderville, Utah, about 20 miles northeast and upstream of Zion National Park, into a reservoir with a capacity of just over 6,000 acre-feet. An acre-foot is the volume of water that would fill an area about the size of a football field to a depth of one foot.

A 1996 [agreement](#) signed between the state of Utah, the Washington and Kane County Water Conservancy Districts and the United States of America, on behalf of the NPS limits how much water can be diverted from flows above Zion National Park to a combined storage of 6,750 acre-feet, meaning that if Cove Reservoir is built, it will likely be the only such reservoir allowed to cut into Zion's share of the Virgin River as long as the agreement stands.

According to Zachary Renstrom, General Manager of the Washington County Water Conservancy District, the agreement also dictates how water could be captured and released from the reservoir, in order to preserve natural flows and flash flood cycles through Zion's famous Narrows canyon and other small iconic southern Utah slot canyons that are shaped by the flow of water through rock.

"If there was a big flash flood, they would divert a small amount of that into the reservoir, but the vast majority of that would come through the park like it has historically done and it would preserve that environment up there,"

Renstrom said.

But while representatives in Wednesday's public meeting displayed unequivocal support for the project's community and environmental benefits, others still harbor doubts.

Project status

In addition to excavating the reservoir area and building a 1900-foot-long, 90-foot-high dam, the project would also necessitate the construction of spillways, a recreation area, boat ramp, hydroelectric power plant, transmission line, and an access road on private lands near Orderville.

It is currently in the public review phase mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 during which the lead agency, in this case the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, accepts comments from the public on the [Draft Watershed Plan and Environmental Assessment](#), which was released in October. See below for details on how to submit a public comment.

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The Cove Reservoir would be relatively small compared to other nearby reservoirs such as [Sand Hollow in Washington County](#), which has a capacity of just over 51,000 acre-feet.

Whereas the Sand Hollow Reservoir, completed in 2002, [cost \\$37.3 million to construct](#), the cost of the Cove Reservoir is [currently estimated at](#) just under \$30 million.

This expense would be shared by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Kane County Water Conservancy District, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and the Washington County Water Conservancy District, though the details of cost-sharing as well as the level of involvement of the WCWCD have not yet been determined.

"We're a cooperating agency on this project and watching it and we hope it does go through because we do see a benefit to our county," said Renstrom. "Once we know the project has been approved by the federal government, I don't see any hesitancy related to us getting involved."

Support and doubt

The central justification for the project is to improve access to irrigation water for farmers in both Kane and Washington counties during summer months when streamflow in the Virgin River typically drops dramatically.

The proposed reservoir would divert enough water from the Virgin River's East Fork during spring high flows to later irrigate 1,100 acres in Kane County and 4,958 acres in Washington County of primarily alfalfa fields through

summer releases.

Renstrom explained that these farmers have been forced to cut their growing seasons short in recent years due to ongoing and worsening drought conditions and that the reservoir will help them return to full growing seasons.

In the meeting Wednesday, Brent Gardner of the Utah Association of Counties elaborated that "existing stream flows do not meet minimum irrigation rights."

"The water rights actually belong to the irrigators," answered Mike Noel of the Kane County Water Conservancy District in response to repeated questions from meeting attendees about the role of water rights in the establishment of the Cove Reservoir. "They have a right to use it for as long as they want it." Noel added that up to 85% of water rights in the state of Utah are owned by farmers or ranchers, but that the water retained in the Cove Reservoir could potentially be allocated to other uses in the future if, at some point, the nearby farmers relinquish their senior rights.

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Bryan Dixon, a board member with the environmental organization [Conserve Southwest Utah](#), however, countered

in a phone call that he doubts remedying the legal access to water for rights holders was the true motivation behind the project. It is up to the state water engineer, Dixon said, to take action to ensure senior rights holders have access to the water they own on paper.

"There is no obligation on the part of Kane County or the KCWCD to develop this reservoir for the farmers," Dixon said. "They're doing it because they have constituents who want to make more money by growing more alfalfa."

Nevertheless, Dixon feels the project does also have some environmental benefits and noted that Conserve Southwest Utah has not yet taken an official position on it.

First he listed some downsides of the project, namely the expense, which he suggested could be put to better use as COVID relief, and the fact that he views the project as a subsidy of alfalfa, a water-intensive feed crop which he says is not in the public interest to continue growing. Then he mentioned some advantages.

"There are some positives. It's storage, so in a sense that's good. It's cooler than Sand Hollow just based on the elevation, so cooler is less evaporation," Dixon said. "And the releases in the summer will help some of the fish species downstream. There's also the hydropower that's going to be generated. So most times that we can generate

energy without the use of fossil fuels, that's a good thing."

Representatives of the project have justified the relatively high expense compared to that for the much larger Sand Hollow Reservoir by highlighting plans outlined in the [Draft Plan-EA](#) for a boat ramp, camping facilities, restrooms, parking area, and a pavilion intended to bring revenue and recreation opportunities to the relatively isolated and economically-disadvantaged western Kane County communities of Orderville, Glendale, and Mt. Carmel.

THE WATER TAP:[How protecting endangered species protects our water source](#)

Proponents also argue that the reservoir will, as Dixon mentioned, benefit native fish species. It aims to do this both by including a 34-acre conservation pool that would serve as a cold water trout fishery and by increasing summer flows down the Virgin River that would aid the recovery of two endangered fish species, the woundfin and the Virgin River chub. The [Draft Plan-EA](#) claims that balancing out the streamflow could potentially also enhance habitat for the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher bird.

Steve Meismer, the local coordinator of the [Virgin River Program](#), a multi-agency partnership which seeks to "recover, enhance and protect" the Virgin River ecosystem

did not respond to a request for a comment on these alleged biological advantages of the Cove Reservoir.

Zachary Frankel, Executive Director of the [Utah Rivers Council](#), however, did not hesitate to cast doubt.

"The claims this project will benefit fish through enhanced flows are completely bogus since there's no commitment to deliver water to benefit fish at all," Frankel said. "There's no studies, data or agreements to support this claim — just unicorn optics and good old boy politics."

Weigh in

Comments about the Draft Plan-EA can be submitted through December 31 [via a mail-in form](#) posted on the [project's NRCS webpage](#) or by sending an email to Brian Parker at bparker@transcon.com. More information on submitting a comment can be found at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/PA_NRCSConsumption/download?cid=nrcseprd1704224&ext=pdf.

Joan Meiners is an Environment Reporter for The Spectrum & Daily News through the Report for America initiative by The Ground Truth Project. Support her work by [donating](#) to these non-profit programs today. Follow Joan on Twitter at [@beecycles](#) or email her at jmeiners@thespectrum.com.