

Water officials propose new reservoir off Virgin River to benefit Kane, Washington counties

Written by [Mori Kessler](#) December 1, 2020

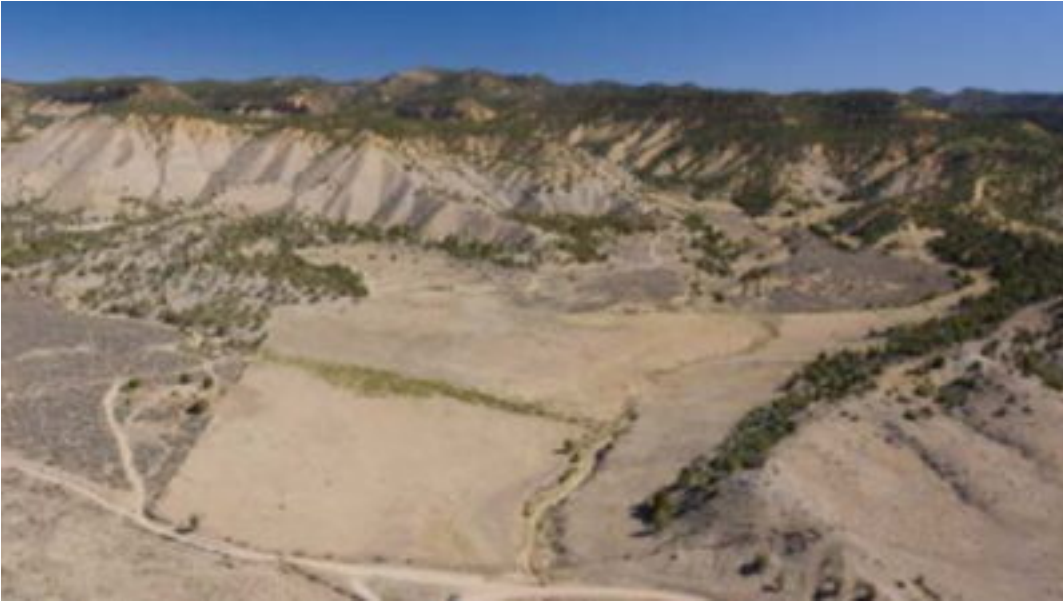


Composite image showing proposed area for the Cove Reservoir in Kane County west of Orderville with overlaid map, Kane County, Utah, date unspecified | Images courtesy of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, St. George News

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ST. GEORGE — A project proposed by Kane County water officials would see the creation of a new 6,000 acre-foot

reservoir west of Orderville that would be filled with water from the Virgin River upstream of Zion National Park.



Proposed area for the Cove Reservoir in Kane County west of Orderville, Kane County, Utah, date unspecified | Photo courtesy of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, St. George News

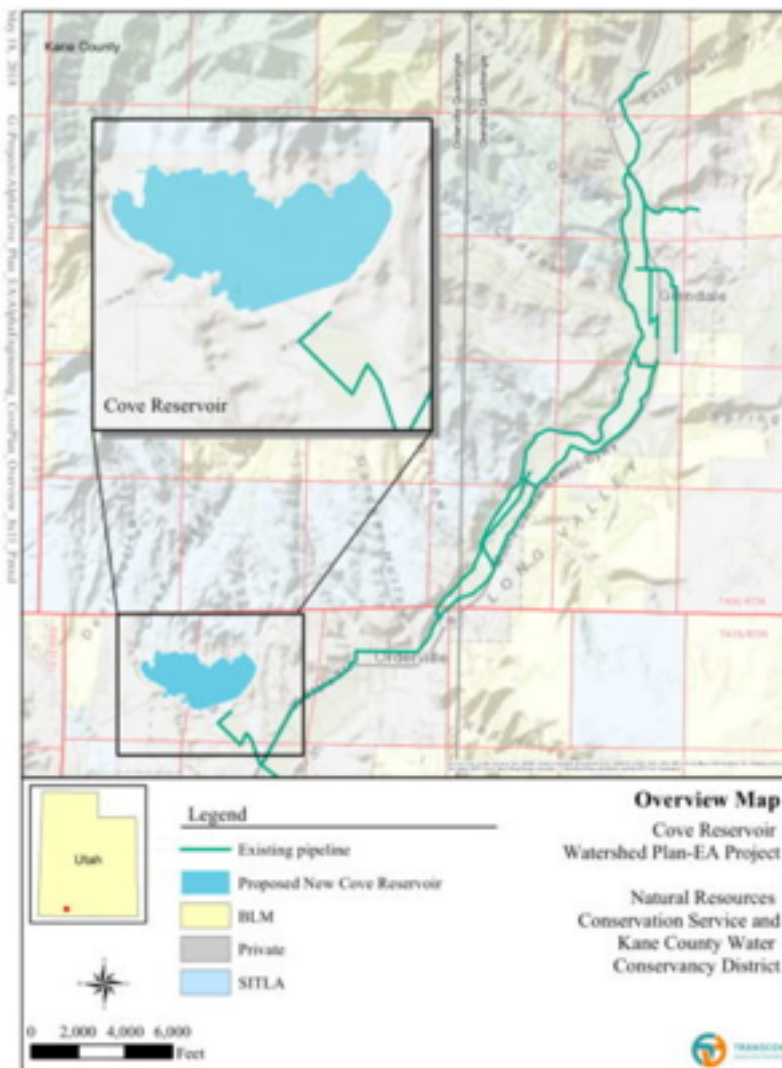
The proposed Cove Reservoir would be formed behind a 90-foot tall dam on the East Fork of the Virgin River. Mike Noel, general manager of the Kane County Water Conservancy District, told St. George News on Monday that a purpose of the reservoir is to benefit farmers in Kane and Washington counties, as well as provide recreational and wildlife benefits.

"It's to collect Virgin River water (and) store it at a higher elevation so there's less evaporation and make it available to farmers in the area and farmers in St. George and the commercial customers in St. George," Noel said.

The project would provide an additional 1,600 acre-feet in

irrigation to farmers, he said, adding that was equivalent to water used by 3,200 households.

An environmental assessment released Monday by the National Resources Conservation Service states that farmers in the Glendale, Orderville and Mt. Carmel areas experience frequent water shortages in irrigation and agriculture use due to a lack of water storage capacity on the East Fork of the Virgin River. The creation of the Cove Reservoir would help remedy this issue, the assessment states.



Approximately 5,000 acres of farmland in Washington County and 1,100 acres of farmland in Kane County are estimated to benefit from stable irrigation flows from the new reservoir.

'The proposed Cove Reservoir would store spring flood water that could be released into the Virgin River later in

A map showing the general location of the proposed the season when flows

area for the Cove Reservoir in Kane County, Utah |
Photo courtesy of the Natural Resources
Conservation Service, St. George News | [Click to
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are low or during drought
conditions," Karry Rathje
of the Washington
County Water

Conservancy District said in an email to St. George News.
"Flows released into the Virgin River could be captured by
the Washington County Water Conservancy District
(WCWCD) via the existing Quail Creek Diversion Dam."

The county's level of participation has not yet been
determined as details of the project are still being reviewed,
Rathje said.

While farmers in both counties would get the benefit of
additional irrigation, Kane County would also see additional
revenue from recreational use focused around the new
reservoir.

"There is currently a high demand for recreation sites in
Kane County," the assessment states. "Local recreation
areas often exceed visitation capacity, especially during
summer months. Implementation of this project would
provide necessary water during the summer months to local
water users and provide an additional, developed recreation
site in the county."

The project is also projected to be a benefit to the
endangered fish and bird species of the Virgin River, as

summertime water releases from the dam would increase water flow on the river by an additional 880 acre-feet, according to the assessment.

As part of the proposal, the Glendale hydroelectric power plant would be relocated to the new reservoir and upgraded. It is projected to produce between 200,000-540,000 kilowatt hours per year. The Orderville hydroelectric plant is also anticipated to produce approximately 440,000 kilowatt hours per year due to increased summer water flow through the plant created by the reservoir.

The reservoir is projected to take three years to build at a cost of \$30 million. Federal grants make up the bulk of that at \$21.4 million. According to the assessment report, the remainder is potential covered by Washington and Kane counties and the state. However, Rathje said in Tuesday's email that the district is has not yet committed to any project funding.

"We feel like it's a good benefit," Noel said.

However, some parties are unconvinced of the need for the reservoir and see it as just another way people are encouraged to waste water in southwest Utah.



The Virgin River running through Zion National Park, Utah, June 4, 2020 | Photo by Hollie Reina, St. George News

During a scoping period for the project held earlier this year, Nick Schou, of the nonprofit [Utah Rivers Council](#), submitted a list of objections and concerns about the reservoir proposal to the National Resources Conservation Service.

Schou states there is no apparent need for the Cove Reservoir project, and he claimed the county's water district was exaggerating the need for more water when there was already enough to serve Kane County's future needs and growth.

"Exaggerating future or existing water use is no different than a government representative intentionally exaggerating the number of constituents needing services, or the amount of services an agency claims to deliver to said constituents," Schou wrote in his letter to the National Resources Conservation Service.

Schou also states Kane County has extremely high water use compared to other communities in the Southwest, such as the Las Vegas Valley Water District and Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Authority, which use 203 and 127 gallons per capita per day respectively (based on 2015 and 2016 numbers), as opposed to Kane County's 309 gallons per capita per day (based on 2010 numbers).

Both Kane and Washington County water officials have argued the numbers aren't exactly reliable, as different states count their water use differently, which they say does not allow for a true and accurate comparison.



Stock image by Mori Kessler, St. George News

Schou also expressed a concern for the impact on potential culturally sensitive sites within the proposed area of the new reservoir.

During the construction of the Jackson Flat Reservoir in

Kane County over 10 years ago, "contractors uncovered 54 sets of Native American Indian remains in the area and inside the reservoir footprint," Schou wrote.

Despite these findings, the Kane County Water Conservancy District "recklessly pushed forward" with the reservoir's construction, he wrote, and "lost the trust of local tribes."

"The fact that the KCWCD has embarked on another similar project through the proposed Cove Reservoir should raise eyebrows and requires the greatest level of scrutiny by the USDA as well as a full (environmental impact study) for the project," Schou wrote.

The Cove Reservoir's environmental assessment appears to avoid future similar archaeological issues as those seen at Jackson Flat. If human remains are found, all work within 100 feet of the discovery ceases, and local, state and federal authorities are called in.

"The location of the discovery will be secured and monitored to prevent further impacts and the location will be kept confidential," the assessment states. "The remains will be treated in accordance with the requirements of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act."

Construction will only resume after required consultations

are concluded. Construction personnel will also be trained in how to recognize objects of cultural or historic interest, according to the assessment.

The National Resources Conservation Service is holding a virtual public meeting on the proposed reservoir project Dec. 9 from 6-7 p.m.

The meeting can be accessed via [Zoom](#) (Enter Meeting ID: 922 7721 9285), or by phone at: 253-215-8782 (Enter Meeting ID)

Public documents related to the project [can be found online](#).

Update Dec. 1, 2:55 p.m. This story has been updated with statements from the Washington County Water Conservancy District received Tuesday following publication.

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Mori Kessler serves as a Senior Reporter for St. George

News, having previously contributed as a writer and Interim Editor in 2011-12, and an assistant editor from 2012 to mid-2014. He began writing news as a freelancer in 2009 for Today in Dixie, and joined the writing staff of St. George News in mid-2010. He enjoys photography and won an award for photojournalism from the Society of Professional Journalists for a 2018 photo of a bee inspector removing ferals bees from a Washington City home. He is also a shameless nerd and has a bad sense of direction.