Letter to the editor: Why is Utah allowing yet another high-risk dam to be built?

By Martha Ham November 05, 2026

Summary
The proposed Cove Reservoir in Kane County, Utah, is a high-risk dam that could pose a threat to nearby towns if it fails. The environmental assessment for the reservoir did not consider the impact of climate change, raising concerns about its long-term safety and security.



(Mark Eddington | The Salt Lake Tribune) The Virgin River is shown in 2023.

The Cove Reservoir is a 6,000-acre foot off-stream reservoir proposed for Kane County that is perched above the historic towns of Orderville and Mt. Carmel. The Kane County Water Conservancy District and the Washington County Water Conservancy District, WCWCD, are co-sponsoring the construction of the reservoir with water supplied by local irrigation companies. Kane County farmers will take stored water diverted from the East Fork of the Virgin for an additional alfalfa cutting; the WCWCD will use 1,300-acre feet annually for

development of 800 homes and agricultural needs. These facts are included in the draft Environmental Impact Statement that is now open for public review. The comment period closes Nov. 2.

The 90-foot-tall earthen dam creating Cove Reservoir is classified as a high-risk dam by the state, meaning that if the dam failed there would likely be a loss of life; the classification isn't a forecast of dam failure.

The Utah Division of Water Resources has identified 99 high-risk dams throughout the state which need high level upgrading and monitoring. In a recent legislative budget request, the division stated: "Current funding levels are woefully insufficient to cover needs through FY26 and beyond." The annual funding was increased but still insufficient.

In this era of erratic and record-breaking climate events, the environmental assessment for Cove Reservoir was completed without considering the current and forecasted impact of climate change due to recent policy changes in the Trump administration. The long-term safety and security of Cove's earthen dam is unexamined with respect to the extreme and historically atypical storms episodically coming to the region.

Why is the state of Utah allowing for yet another high-risk dam to be built and, more importantly, one that hasn't been fully vetted considering the dangerous conditions arising from climate change?

Martha Ham, Leeds

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