

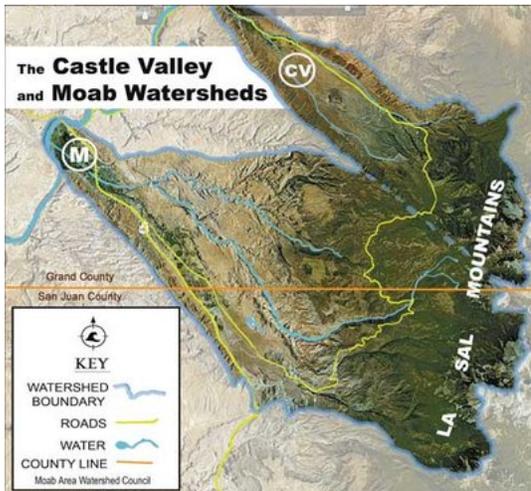
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New council aims to develop protection plan for aquifers, watersheds

by Craig Bigler

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The Grand County Council voted unanimously last month to join Moab, federal land management and research agencies, conservation districts, the state School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA), the Utah Division of Water Quality, and others in support of a new organization called the Moab Area Watershed Council.

With the many agencies and local governments committed to the process, the council's mission is to create a watershed protection plan for the aquifers and watersheds of the area drained by Mill Creek and Pack Creek, according to Dave Erley, one of the watershed council's founders.

Erley said he hopes the watershed plan will be incorporated into Grand County's general plan.

One of the first steps in developing the plan, following Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guidelines, will be to assess the water source and how the water flows, according to local conservationist John Weisheit.

Efforts to bring in private people and entities into the watershed council are now underway, led by the group's temporary chairwoman, Kara Dohrenwend.

"Our water situation right now is relatively good," except for pollution in the two creeks, said Laurel Hagen, who is working to set up the council so it will be eligible for EPA project grants administered by the Division of Water Quality.

But nobody knows for certain how much water is produced within the watershed or how it flows underground, and there has never been a successful effort to coordinate the many agencies involved in its management, Hagen said.

A growing population and the potential of less precipitation in the La Sal Mountains, or weather that melts the snowpack too quickly for it to soak into the ground, make a watershed protection plan that all agencies and local

governments support vital to the community, Hagen said.

When she asked for Grand County's support, Hagen assured the county council that the new watershed council will be completely independent, neither taking direction from member agencies nor giving direction to them.

The work to bring in private parties and entities, and to involve San Juan County, where nearly half the watershed lies, is just getting started, Dohrenwend said. Other potential partners include farming and ranching, recreation (including hunting and fishing), business and development, environmental groups, and homeowners in the south end of Spanish Valley, she said.

"It's not clear what the correct size [for the council] is," Dohrenwend said. Efforts to contact all the private entities and figure out how to keep the numbers of them on the council at a workable level are just getting underway, she said,

Jerry McNeely, a former Grand County Council member who now works for San Juan County to coordinate projects that involve both counties, said he thinks the concept "is a good idea."

But McNeely said he worries the group will be too big to function smoothly. He is wary of anything that may impinge on grazing, and said he has to "wait and see" how things get set up before he decides what kind of participation he will recommend for San Juan County.

The new council is a spinoff from the Canyonlands Watershed Council, a private group that is not eligible for EPA grants administered by the DWQ because it does not include government agencies, according to Weisheit, a founder of the private group.

Canyonlands Watershed Council obtained a grant from the Model Forest Policy Program, funded by the Kresge Foundation, to pay Erley and Hagen to set up the new, all inclusive, watershed council and get the ball rolling toward preparation of a watershed plan, Weisheit said.

Under the private grant, Erley and Hagen are enrolled in an on-line watershed planning class provided by the Climate Solutions University, which has an impressive faculty of experts that serve as "mentors" in their effort to get the ball rolling and begin to create the plan, Erley said.

Once the plan is completed, it will help the council access EPA grants for projects similar to one that built a berm to keep manure from flowing into Pack Creek. Another project in the Sevier River Basin helped a farmer convert from flood irrigation to sprinklers to help keep fertilizers from being washed into the river, Erley said.

Activities of regional watershed councils such as the Moab Area Watershed

Council, and the EPA sourced grants provided to them, are coordinated by the Utah Watershed Council.

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