

Water restrictions coming to Moab

Summer 2020 hottest on record; Grand part of largest global hotspot in continental US

The Moab City Council is working on an ordinance regarding new ways culinary water will be used in the future, such as restricting the time of day and days of the week for outdoor watering.



Photo by Doug McMurdo

The discussion began at about 10 [p.m.](#) Tuesday, three hours into the council's meeting, so the conversation was brief but pointed. The heavy lifting will be done down the road and will include a vigorous public outreach campaign, according to Assistant City Manager Carly Castle.

Member Kalen Jones made a motion to direct staff to draft a water shortage contingency plan with further discussion planned moving forward. His motion passed 5-0.

And while it is unknown what the council might ultimately decide to do to conserve water, that it needs to do something is not for debate.

An alarming yet hardly surprising report was delivered to the council earlier in the meeting when Roslynn "Ros" McCann of Utah State University Extension Sustainability warned of drier days ahead.

Here are the highlights:

The summer of 2020 will forever be remembered as the summer of COVID-19, but it was also the hottest summer on record. While the heat is up everywhere, Moab is part of a "giant climate hotspot," which includes the Western Slope of Colorado and three southern Utah counties, including Grand County, where temperatures have increased 2 degrees above average. It is the largest such spot in the Lower 48,

said McCann.

Things have become so bad that McCann said all the old terms for drought have been replaced by “megadrought.”

“We’re in a fundamentally different period of what we saw in the last century,” she said, citing experts.

This revelation led to the question of how we use rainwater — as a nuisance rather than a resource, and that has to stop. She spoke of America’s traditional love affair with grass lawns, something American culture values because lawns are part of European royalty and having one is a status symbol. The first lawns surrounded French castles, she noted.





These cisterns on the current downtown campus of Utah State University-Moab, fill with rainwater and snowmelt, which is then used to grow food. Photo by Doug McMurdo

Many communities in the arid Southwest have banned grass lawns at newly constructed homes and have incentivized existing homeowners and businesses to rip out lawns and switch to more water-friendly landscaping. McCann said there are numerous ways to be water smart with landscaping, thanks in large part to a 2013 Utah law that permits people to store up to 2,500 gallons of rainwater, either above- or below-ground. It's a policy McCann said is "more progressive than over in Colorado."

She said there is an “interesting paradigm shift” regarding Utah’s stormwater code, with the emphasis shifting to answering this question: Do those policies hamper or even prohibit green infrastructure? She said the 2013 law allows property owners to quit pushing away rainwater to directing it into a tank system for reuse.

She said the aridification of the Colorado River — defined as a region that gradually becomes permanently drier rather than seasonally — at a time when Moab receives an average of just [9.5](#) inches of annual precipitation.

Fortunately, Moab is ahead of most of the rest of the state in terms of taking action. The city, along with Spanish Fork and Logan, already requires low-impact green infrastructure to be practiced on any project that disturbs more than one acre of land. The work is designed to collect runoff.

McCann pointed to the current USU-Moab campus downtown, which she said built a system that collects rainwater from the roof and diverts it into a basin, which is used to grow food that is donated to the Moab Valley Multicultural Center and the Episcopal Church food bank.

“We created paradise and took out a parking lot, I like to say,” said McCann, a reference to the iconic Joni Mitchell song, “The Big Yellow Taxi.” The rooftop water gathering operation yields an astonishing 125,000 gallons of water per year.

Other ideas to put runoff to beneficial use are curb cuts, wherein rainwater is diverted to easements where foliage is planted.

She said trees have been watered sufficiently using this method only. The Resiliency Hub, Moab Community Gardens and the city's Moab Arts and Recreation Center all feature rainwater collection.

McCann said permaculture is needed to counter climate change as one key way to draw down greenhouse gases, but more needs to be done, posing this rhetorical question: "Where do we go to get more sustainable?"

The sobering report prompted Mayor Emily Niehaus to say "it's time to take action." Niehaus thanked McCann for her report.