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Utah needs a water policy

BY JEFF CLAY

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While the West is drying up, our water is being siphoned off and no one is doing anything about it. Gov. Gary Herbert has called for a comprehensive water strategy, but has done nothing more.

What's alarming is that while the state dithers, the federal Bureau of Land Management approved a Las Vegas water grab that will pipe billions of gallons of water each year from eastern Nevada valleys (near the border with Utah) to water-hungry (and extravagant) Las Vegas.

We're talking here about exploiting the Snake Valley aquifer with a pipeline capable of drawing 117,000 acre-feet per year, with initial approval for an annual 84,000 acre-feet. This, critics say, will drive western Utah ranchers and farmers out of business and lead to the extinction of various Utah plants and animals.

Though some are happy that the plan appears to skirt the Utah border, it nonetheless draws an enormous amount of water from the underground aquifers that span Utah and Nevada. It must be asked: How does this proposed 117,000 acre-feet "straw" determine from which state to draw the water? It doesn't: Aquifers know no borders.

And though the project will inevitably rob Utah of water, plant and animal life, and the jobs now offered by western Utah's small business owners, our complacent governor has no comment.

Add to this the potential loss of water resulting from the state's approval to lease 53,600 acre-feet per year of Utah's water to the proposed Green River nuclear power plant, and factor in the proposed Lake Powell-to-St. George pipeline, and a proposal to pipe water from the Green River to Denver.

Then, seriously contemplate Rep. Mike Noel's Zion View Mountain Estate's \$9.3 million water system to service the current summer-only residents, to encourage development of hundreds of high-end new homes. Add proposed fracking and oil shale development, which contaminates enormous amounts of water.

All of this begs for a comprehensive water plan. Instead, it is utterly perplexing that while the governor himself paints a grim picture of Utah's water future, and while we experience droughts, fires, and increased development, no one is actually taking any action to articulate a balanced plan to assure us that the state's water is being thoughtfully managed and protected through a comprehensive strategy.

We must hope that the state's water policy will not be doomed to following the course of the governor's erstwhile energy policy. Recall that in 2010, Herbert called together a working group to develop a 10-year energy plan, then thwarted their work by claiming that Utah's energy policy would not be shaped by government directives, but by "market incentives," claiming that the nation's energy crisis (at least he acknowledged there is one) would be solved by the "tried and tested model of free markets."

This has done so well. Even now, while the Arctic is melting due to global warming, oil companies are lining up to drill, baby, drill.

While the governor wants the state to be "energy independent" and "agriculturally independent," he would be wise to act as if he also wanted the state to be "water independent." Our water future is far more threatened than any other resource, yet we passively pretend that this incredible desert is a boundless "Eden."

Unless the governor and the Legislature act to protect the state's water, independence of any kind will quickly crumble, like their own hollow words, into the sands of the desert.

Words are cheap, words are endless. Water is neither.

Jeff Clay is a photographer and information technology consultant for small nonprofits.

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