

<https://www.sltrib.com/news/environment/2018/04/04/utah-water-officials-want-to-own-a-piece-of-bear-lake-but-they-say-they-arent-interested-in-development-yet/>

Utah wants the power to keep a ‘startling’ amount of water in Bear Lake, but will the Great Salt Lake suffer?



Scott Sommerdorf | The Salt Lake Tribune Boats, jetskis and sailboats ply the waters off Rendezvous Beach State Park on the south end of Bear Lake, Saturday, July, 3, 2010.



[By Emma Penrod](#)

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Officials in Utah and Idaho have filed an application to control an unclaimed portion of water in Bear Lake, in what some see as a danger to the Great Salt Lake and a prelude to development on northern Utah's Bear River.

If approved, the application filed with the Utah Division of Water Rights would give officials in the two states control of 400,000 acre-feet of water in Bear Lake — more than four times the amount of water at stake in Utah's controversial Lake Powell pipeline proposal.

Utah and Idaho water managers hope to “store and appropriate water” in Bear Lake that in the past has been released from there for flood control purposes, according to the application.

Eric Millis, director of the Utah Division of Water Resources, said there now are other means of controlling flooding on Bear Lake and on the Bear River. Taking advantage of these alternatives, he said, would allow Utah and Idaho to store more water in Bear Lake, raising the level of the lake by about a foot and stabilizing the levels for recreational purposes.

In times of drought, Millis said, that stored water could then be used to boost municipal water supplies, to guarantee farmers have enough water to grow crops, or to stabilize water levels on the Great Salt Lake downstream.

That should be good news to the saline lake's supporters, Millis said. But Lynn de Freitas, executive director of Friends of Great Salt Lake, said she had a bad feeling about the lack of details the Division of Water Resources has offered in its filings.

Many scientists believe the Great Salt Lake has already shrunk to half its historic size because of water development projects that divert water out of the lake's natural tributaries, including the Bear River. The 400,000 acre-feet in question, de Freitas said, is close to numbers she has heard as the maximum amount of water that could be taken from the Bear River.

“It would be a huge impact on the system,” de Freitas said. “It's alarming, and I don't see how, unless there was some very definitive, long-term plan to include the Great Salt Lake in the conversation, how this could be a good thing for the lake.”

According to the application, the stored would be made available to municipal providers for use in Cache, Box Elder, Weber, Davis and Salt Lake counties in Utah, as well as Bear Lake, Caribou, Oneida and Franklin counties in Idaho.

Zach Frankel, executive director of the Utah Rivers Council, said he takes that to mean Utah intends to tap its portion of this water for the state's unpopular Bear River Development Project. That project calls for construction of a series of dams and pipelines on the Bear River at an estimated cost of \$1.5 billion. However, [state officials have delayed that project](#), citing a lack of demand for the water.

“What other use is there in Salt Lake County?” Frankel asked. “This sounds like the same misinformation and obstruction this troubling agency has been involved in for decades.”

That project, Frankel warned in a news release, “would dry up tens of thousands of acres of wetlands and kill off habitat for millions of migratory birds. Lowering the lake will also impact air quality along the Wasatch Front by exposing vast tracts of lake bed and increasing the amount of airborne dust during windstorms.”

But Millis said the state has no immediate plans to make the Bear Lake water available to new users in the region. The intent, he said, is to shore up both states’ existing water supplies, not to create new water supplies to foster growth on the Wasatch Front.

Millis said that Utah already owns water rights linked to Bear River development, and he denied that the most recent application is related — though he acknowledged that the water could be provided to users through the Bear River project in times of future shortages.

Given that Utah already controls the water necessary for Bear River development, Frankel acknowledged that it wasn’t entirely clear why Utah wanted another 400,000 acre-feet out of the water system — an amount he described as “startling.”

“The division is now proposing to divert half the flows of the Bear River for water development that doesn’t exist,” he said.

Millis was unable to say exactly where Utah intends to send the water if its application is successful. He said talks are underway about how the water would be divvied up between Utah and Idaho, and who would get to use the water.

“We do know that we want to have it just to help backstop those supplies for the irrigators and municipal users. We just don’t know exactly how to do that,” he said. “We felt like, secure this, and we’ll figure out exactly how we’ll use it here over the next little while.”