



Having Enough Water

September 25, 2024

Having enough water was important to voters in the 2024 Utah Priorities Project. Survey respondents across various demographic groups felt very similarly about this issue. Most of the open-ended comments focused on ensuring that Utah has enough water, particularly in light of the state’s rapid population growth. Three current issues regarding water are the efforts to encourage less residential outdoor water use, legislation that incentivizes agricultural efficiency, and updates to the Colorado River interim guidelines.

Household Outdoor Watering Update

Outdoor landscape watering accounts for up to 65% of annual municipal water use in Utah.¹ As a result, state and local government actions seek to expand awareness on best practices for outdoor watering and provide incentives to reduce water use in this area. Utah’s most recent Coordinated Action Plan for Water in 2022 highlighted multiple state initiatives and community partnerships working towards these conservation goals.²

Utah Water Savers is a rebate incentive program to assist households with alternative landscaping projects that will reduce outdoor watering.³ The program expanded after receiving funding from the Utah State Legislature in 2022 and 2023.⁴ Applicants in qualifying cities and counties can earn up to three dollars per square foot of grass removed and replaced with water-conscious landscaping through the Landscaping Incentive Program.⁵ Additionally, Utah Water Savers also provides rebates for qualifying applicants who install smart irrigation control systems or water-efficient toilets.⁶

Another of several outdoor water-conservation programs is Localscapes, a waterwise landscaping initiative.⁷ It emphasizes landscaping layouts that minimize watering and maintenance needs while reducing non-functional lawn area. The program offers free classes throughout the state that educate Utahns on waterwise landscape design.⁸ Conservation initiatives at the local level may help reduce overall water usage throughout Utah.

Utah voters express a willingness to take further steps to reduce their own outdoor water use. Over 54% of respondents report they are very or extremely willing to remove 50% of their lawn or allow it to be brown during summer

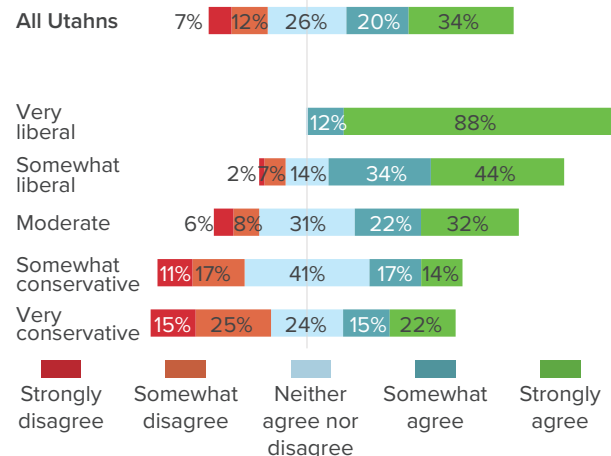
months to reduce the cost of Utah’s water infrastructure investments by 30%. Liberal voters, Democrats, and the non-religious were all more willing than conservative voters, Republicans, unaffiliated voters, and the actively and inactively religious. (See Figure 1.)

Agriculture Water Update

The agricultural industry accounts for about 75% of Utah’s water use.⁹ As a result, expanding water resiliency and optimization in agriculture is a priority for Utah’s leaders. During the 2023 session, the Utah State Legislature created the Agricultural Water Optimization Program which appropriated \$200 million for agricultural optimization project grants.¹⁰

Most Utahns are very or extremely willing to reduce grass and let it brown if they can expect savings in infrastructure investment.

Figure 1: Willingness to remove 50% of lawn or allow it to be brown during summer months to reduce the cost of Utah’s water infrastructure investments by 30%



Source: Utah Foundation survey.

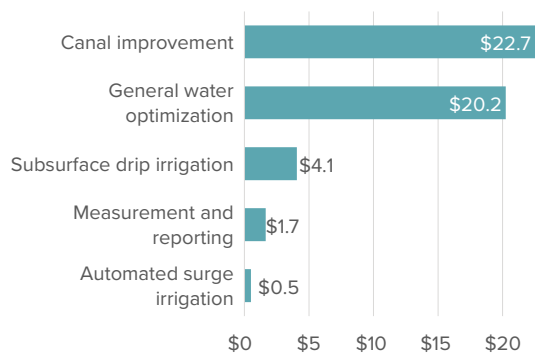
Program projects must meet several requirements: fitting into one of five approved categories, demonstrating water savings, documenting project results, metering water levels in real-time for reporting purposes, and reporting on water usage levels and crop production for three years after the project is completed.¹¹ Additionally, 20% of grant funding is withheld until the project is complete and the organization has submitted its final report and final inspection results.¹² Most of the funding is used to optimize canal/irrigation companies and improve farm pivot-sprinkler watering. (See Figure 2.)

Colorado River Process Update

The Colorado River is an essential water source for Utahns and other Western States. A collection of legislation, regulations, and agreements established over the past 100 years known as “The Law of the River” governs river use by the Upper Basin states (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming) and the Lower Basin states (Arizona, California, and Nevada). Under the current

Most agriculture optimization has focused on farms, canals, and irrigation projects.

Figure 2: Agricultural Optimization Grant Spending (in millions), FY 2024



Source: Utah Division of Water Resources

agreement, Utah receives 23% of the Upper Basin water supply.¹³ About 27% of Utah’s total water supply comes from the Colorado River.¹⁴

The most recent update to the Law of the River was a set of interim guidelines negotiated in 2007, which addressed long-term water shortages among Lower Basin states.¹⁵ These guidelines will expire in 2026. In 2022, the United States Bureau of Reclamation initiated the federal process for developing post-2026 negotiation plans.¹⁶

Currently, Reclamation is assessing alternative proposals, with the goal of releasing a draft plan in December 2024. The Upper Basin, the Lower Basin, and other stakeholders, including Tribal coalitions, conservation groups, and advocacy organizations, have submitted their own proposals and suggestions for Reclamation to consider.¹⁷ The Upper Basin states, including Utah, submitted a proposal that suggested a new variable release system from Lake Powell based on existing hydrologic conditions to build storage and preserve water flow downstream.¹⁸ Additionally, the Upper Basin alternative seeks to improve the accounting system for Upper Basin water levels and acknowledge Tribal water rights in the region.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the Lower Basin coalition’s plan would cut water usage among Lower Basin states.²⁰ This part of the proposal addresses the previously unaccounted for loss of water through evaporation and distribution.²¹ Further, the Lower Basin states proposed a system where the Upper and Lower basins cut usage equally during periods of low water storage to maintain water flow downstream.²² While the Lower Basin states acknowledge the unaccounted for losses in distribution and intend to cut usage regardless, the Upper Basin proposal does not require that Upper Basin states adjust usage during shortages, illustrating the conflicting interests between the two regions.

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This research brief was written by Research Intern Ella Sjoblom with assistance from other Utah Foundation staff.

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