

County Commission Update: Protecting a Vital Natural Resource

By Wade Mathews, Public Information Officer

It's a remnant of an ancient body of water that once covered most of our county and much of the western states region. Now the Great Salt Lake is all that remains of Lake Bonneville. Because of its unique mineral qualities, the Great Salt Lake, specifically its south arm, provides a valuable resource to our county. The lake's minerals are utilized by several large businesses in Tooele County, it provides recreation opportunities, and the lake is a great tourist attraction to this area. But that resource that is the Great Salt Lake is being threatened.

The Tooele County Commission has learned of a proposal by Great Salt Lake Minerals Corporation (GSL), located on the north side of the lake that has the potential of decreasing the level of the southern arm by six to 30 inches a year. GSL originally proposed withdrawing 360,000 acre feet of water per year from the north arm of the lake. Due to some criticism, GSL may reduce that request. The lake is already at historic low levels due to the past draught experienced in the region.

Commissioner Jerry Hurst says, "GSL's proposal could have a drastic effect on the operations of our businesses located along the southern shore. Five major companies and several small businesses rely on the lake being at a certain level and on having high salinity content."

Those major companies include Morton Salt, Cargill Salt, Broken Arrow, US Magnesium and Allegheny Technologies. They make up the Tooele County Great Salt Lake South Arm Industry Consortium. Together they provide 801 jobs, 2.7 million dollars in property taxes to the county, and more than 2 million dollars in fees and royalties to the State of Utah. Brine shrimp and salt crystal companies also rely on the lake for operations and contribute to our county's economy.

The State's Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands manages the Great Salt Lake. The Division is revising the Great Salt Lake Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP), adopted in 2000, to provide direction for the protection and use of Great Salt Lake resources for the next 10 years. The Great Salt Lake Advisory Board is considering the permit request from GSL.

Tooele County Commissioners took the opportunity to make a presentation to the Great Salt Lake Advisory Board expressing their concerns about GSL's proposal. The Commissioners are hoping to educate the Board and help it make the decision to restrict or limit the GSL permit request. The Governor appointed a representative to the Great Salt Lake Advisory Board who happens to be Tooele County's lobbyist and the government relations liaison for US Magnesium. The Commissioners know that Dan Tuttle will look out for Tooele County's interests in this matter.

Commissioner Colleen Johnson says, “We’re concerned with the impacts this proposal could have on Tooele County. It would not only hurt the economy due to lost jobs, wages, and taxes, but it would also affect our climate. A lower lake level could reduce the “lake effect” precipitation we receive.” Commissioner Hurst says, “The indirect effects of a reduced lake level could harm our watersheds and reduce aquifer and reservoir levels, seriously limiting municipal water resources and agricultural water resources.”

Commissioner Hurst added that Tooele County Commissioners have no animosity towards GSL, but only want to protect the businesses here which count on Great Salt Lake resources being available to them. They plan to continue expressing their position to the Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands (FFSL) and the Great Salt Lake Advisory Board.

The Commission also wants to see that an extensive environmental study be conducted before the GSL permit is considered. The Commission believes that a long term plan should be one that encourages a return to a natural state in which salinity in both arms of the lake is equalized.

Commissioner Johnson says, “It’s important that everyone remembers that a delicate balance has to be maintained. What happens in one arm of the lake affects the other arm of the lake.”

“We would like the surrounding states to take a hard look at the way they manage the major rivers and tributaries that feed the Great Salt Lake. That water is being diverted and further decreasing the level of the lake,” Commissioner Bruce Clegg says. “People need to realize that water is not being wasted when it reaches the Great Salt Lake.”

The Great Salt Lake is a great asset to our county and to the state. It’s a part of nature that we can’t take for granted. The Commissioners hope that everyone involved can work together to come up with a satisfactory solution to this important issue.

The Commissioners are encouraging the public to get involved, to learn more about this issue, and to express their opinions. FFSL is seeking input from the five counties surrounding the lake. Public comment is also being accepted at FFSL, 257 East 200 South, Suite, 200, Salt Lake City, Utah 84111. Project information can be obtained at www.gslplanning.utah.gov.