

WILL UTAH DAM THE BEAR RIVER?

As the Wasatch Front faces drier times and a growing population, the future of the Great Salt Lake is at stake

BY EMILY BENSON

Does it make sense to build a new dam project, decades after the heyday of big dams is over? How do you decide?

Amid the wave of dams coming down across the nation, several places are bucking the trend. New dams have been proposed in California, Colorado, Utah and other Western states. The motivations behind the projects are complex, but in some cases the same fears drive dam defenders and detractors alike: a drier future and rising populations.

Utah is seeking additional water sources to address its growth. There, legislators decreed in 1991 that the Bear River, the Great Salt Lake's largest tributary, should host a water development project. Two and a half decades later, scientists, policy experts, environmentalists, residents and water managers are still grappling with whether or not — and how — to move forward with damming the Bear.

The answers they come to will have consequences for the \$1.3 billion generated each year by industries reliant on the Great Salt Lake. The lake's ecology, its wetlands and the millions of migratory birds that depend on it are also at risk — as is the health of the more than 2 million people who live nearby and could breathe in harmful dust from a drying lakebed. Caught between the dire costs of construction and the specter of dwindling water supplies, the Bear River diversion forces uncomfortable questions. Does it make sense to build a new dam project, decades after the heyday of big dams is over? How do you decide?

The Bear River wends 500 miles through Utah, Wyoming and Idaho, fed by runoff from the Uinta Mountains. The three states share its water, storing and diverting it to supply homes, generate power and irrigate fields. What's left drains into the Great Salt Lake, delivering about 60 percent of the freshwater that flows into the lake each year.

Utah doesn't use its full allotment, so the state Division of Water Resources is studying how to divert some of that water for nearby communities. The agency is currently evaluating possible reservoir sites and other project details. The final plan will likely include one to four dams, as well as pipelines to divert enough water to supply about 440,000 households. Official 2014 cost estimates for the overall project range from \$1.7 billion to \$2 billion.

Why consider building it? Population growth, says Marisa Egbert, program manager of the Bear River Development Project at the Utah Division of Water Resources. More than 2 million people already live in the areas served by the county and the three water districts that would receive the water, and that population number is expected to rise. Critics of the proposal say future needs could be met by water conservation, but Egbert says that alone won't be enough if the population keeps growing, which is why the division is looking for new water sources. "Preparation's in the lifeblood here," she says. "It's important to know what's going on and what to expect."

But what to expect can be a moving target. When the Bear River Development Act was first passed, supporters said the state would need the water by 2015. As population and water-use projections shifted, the deadline slipped to 2040. In January, the Utah Department of Natural Resources announced that it could push the project off even further, thanks to conservation and slower-than-anticipated growth.

That delay reflects recent shifts in both public attitudes toward conservation and Utah's water politics, says Daniel McCool, a retired professor of political science at the University of Utah. McCool was one of about 40 people — state and local wa-

Wilson's phalaropes murmurate over the Great Salt Lake. The lake is the largest feeding ground in the world for this species, and millions of other migratory birds depend on it, as well.

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