

Water should be first priority in Iron County

Paul Cozzens, In My Opinion, [The Spectrum](#)

Utah is one of the fastest-growing states in the country and Iron County is one of the fastest-growing counties in the state. With regards to water this can be a challenge.

I just completed the first year of my second four-year term on the Cedar City Council, and I've had the privilege the last five years to serve as a board member for the Central Iron County Water Conservancy District (CICWCD). The opportunity to serve in these capacities has been a great learning experience for me.

Many of you are aware of the serious challenges we face regarding our water needs in this valley. The state engineer and other experts have determined that the annual safe yield is about 21,000 acre-feet. However, we (municipalities, agriculture, CICWCD, and private) are already depleting about 28,000 acre-feet — creating a deficit of about 7,000 acre-feet per year.

The state engineer is tasked with the responsibility of monitoring these situations, protecting this precious natural resource and ensuring that the water supply is sustainable. He traveled to Cedar City twice in 2016 and met with the public to discuss the need for our basin's groundwater management plan.

Recently, in response to a request from the state engineer, he has recommended that the water users in the valley form a Groundwater Management Plan Committee (GMPC). This committee will be meeting monthly to assist in solving some of our water challenges and help prevent the loss of personal water rights.

In our first meeting, we discussed many issues including: importing water, water conservation, unused water rights, future growth and recharge projects. If we don't solve this problem, the state engineer will be forced to begin reducing water rights until a balanced equilibrium is reached in the aquifer. This means that if you had water flowing into a 55-gallon barrel full of holes (with each hole representing a water right), as the water drops, you would not lose that right, but the flow to holes at the top of the barrel would cease sooner than those with higher priority rights at the bottom.

A large percentage of the city's water rights would become junior and could become unusable in the future, in today's market, the value of that water is tens of millions of dollars. Please be aware that the CICWCD; the municipalities of Enoch, Cedar City, and Kanarrville; Iron County; and agriculture users are taking this seriously.

Cedar City has been successfully recharging about 1,800 acre-feet of water near the airport for the past 10 years and is currently looking at options that involve putting the 2,600 acre-feet of effluent from the wastewater-treatment plant to better use through several options we are discussing. These projects are expensive and we have limited funds.

Last year, the CICWCD successfully completed a recharge project in Enoch and is working on another project near Quichapa Lake where the water is largely wasted because the layer of clay under the lake prevents water from recharging into the aquifer and is wasted through evaporation.

Efforts have been made in the past to reclaim this water. However, once the water reaches the lake, it becomes so contaminated it can't be pumped to another area and used for recharge. Currently, we are working on a new diversion structure to divert excess water before it hits the lake.

The water would then be channeled northwest, under state Route 56, and pumped to an area of land that has excellent percolation qualities. This is very positive due to the fact this area of extraction is where the lion's share of Cedar City's water is pumped and is the aquifer most critically in decline.

Another project well under way is to import water from the west desert valleys of WahWah and Pine (west of Milford). The state engineer has approved portions of our filings and we are working to import up to 12,000 acre-feet from WahWah and 15,000 acre-feet from Pine Valley.

This long-term project comes with a price tag of about \$250 million (a little over half of what the Lake Powell Pipeline would have cost), but is critical for the future growth and sustainability of our valley.

Conservation projects by the Iron County School District, Cedar City Corporation, CICWCD, and private efforts have been very positive as well. However, much more can and should be done.

Cedar City is now going through the process to create a parks and recreation master plan and soliciting input from our citizens to determine priorities. Some of the ventures being considered are high-ticket items that I am struggling to even discuss as we wrangle with the issue of water in our county.

I believe water has to be our first priority.

In order to do that, we have to distinguish between wants and needs. We have to realize that taxpayers' money is not endless, we need to find more ways to create opportunities for private and public partnerships that will allow us to have recreational activities without having to take from resources that are currently needed elsewhere.

I'm open to your ideas. Please don't hesitate to call me or email me at Paul@CozzensCabinets.com.

Paul Cozzens serves on the Cedar City Council, the Central Iron County Water Conservancy board and the Groundwater Management Plan Committee.