

State leaders don't want Utah's wet year to slow momentum for water conservation

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Utah Agricultural Water Optimization Program Manager Hannah Freeze leads a panel on farmland water conservation during the One Utah Summit in Cedar City, Oct. 3, 2023. (David Condos/KUER)

It's been a record-setting water year in Utah. Even so, state leaders want to keep Utahns' minds on conservation.

That's why preparing communities and farms for the next inevitable dry spell held a prominent place at the [One Utah Summit](#) focused on rural issues in Cedar City on Oct. 3. Utah Division of Water Resources director Candice Hasenyager led a panel discussion at the summit on making the state more drought resilient.

"There's no substitute for water," Hasenyager said. "So [conservation] is our opportunity to keep living here and keep our kids and grandkids here."

This time last year, every inch of Utah was experiencing some level of drought. Today, it [covers less than 5%](#) of the state.

When drought isn't putting Utah in dire straits, she said, it can be easy for people to forget that dry years are always going to be part of life here.

"Water is just essential to life, and we live in a really arid state," Hasenyager said. "We have a lot of people who live here right now and more that are coming every day ... so it's just really critical that we keep water and water planning discussions at the forefront."



Utah Director of Water Resources Candice Hasenyager, left, leads a panel on preparing the state for future drought at the One Utah Summit, Oct. 3, 2023. (David Condos/KUER)

Even in a good water year, Hasenyager

said, it's vital to keep building momentum for conservation efforts like the [statewide landscaping incentive program](#). That initiative, launched earlier this year, [pays people](#) to ditch their irrigated grass lawns for more drought tolerant landscaping.

The program has received more than 3,750 applications and has helped Utahns swap out nearly 2 million square feet of grass so far in 2023.

Here are [some numbers](#) that show how the landscape program is doing in different parts of Utah (data reflects January through September 2023):

Washington County Water Conservancy District

739,042 square feet of grass replaced
1,524 applications received

Central Utah Water Conservancy District

628,123 square feet of grass replaced
727 applications received

Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District

363,491 square feet of grass replaced
854 applications received

Weber Basin Water Conservancy District

241,736 square feet of grass replaced
668 applications received

Other areas

1,793 square feet of grass replaced
20 applications received

All these lawn conversions add up. Roughly two-thirds of a typical home's total water use goes outdoors, Hasenyager said, and removing irrigated grass can reduce that portion of water use by more than half.

The number of cities involved in the incentive program has grown from around 10 last year to [more than 50](#) today, Hasenyager said. The state estimates that around half of Utah's residents now live in communities eligible for this rebate. In order for a city to tap into state rebate funding, it needs to adopt its own landscape ordinance that governs things like how much of a new home lot can be covered in grass.

"Grass is not the enemy," she said. "We want it for our kids to play on, for our dogs to play on. But it can't be the default landscape into the future."



Even during this record water year, state leaders want to keep the momentum going with Utah's water conservation programs for lawns and farms. Panels at the One Utah Summit on Southern Utah

University's campus included discussions on furthering efforts to save water across Utah, Oct. 3, 2023. (David Condos/KUER)

Another big piece of the water puzzle is farmland irrigation. [More than three-fourths](#) of all water used in Utah goes to agriculture.

"We're very aware in the agricultural community that everyone is looking to us and we're here to do our part. But we also like to share the message that ...

agriculture can't solely bear that burden," said Hannah Freeze, who manages the state's [Agricultural Water Optimization Program](#).

That program will pay up to half the cost when farmers buy things like water-efficient sprayer nozzles or [surge flood irrigation](#) systems with [\\$200 million](#) in funding from the 2023 legislative session.

It can be [a challenge to get farmers on board](#) with changing their practices, Freeze said, but it becomes easier once they've seen the equipment work in their neighbors' fields. Since launching in 2019, the program has now accepted nearly 500 projects from agricultural operations [around the state](#).

And once farmers start watering their fields more efficiently, it doesn't just conserve Utah water. Freeze said every project the program has taken on has led to better crop yields, too.

"It benefits their farming operation and the environment," she said. "It's just a beautiful win-win."

Mitch Hancock has used funding from the optimization program to upgrade the irrigation system at his dairy farm on the north shores of the Great Salt Lake in Box Elder County. He had been using open dirt ditches to transport water to his fields, where it then irrigates his corn and alfalfa crops. He's now switched many of those ditches to enclosed pipes.

Dirt ditches can lose a lot of water to [evaporation](#) and [seepage](#) before it even gets to the field — when it eventually does get there.

"It would take 45 minutes for the water to travel from the source to our farm," Hancock said. "After these piping projects occur ... we see water within about 45 seconds."

Utah farmers are willing to make water conservation a priority, he said, and programs like this one help make taking a risk on new technologies more financially feasible for them.

"I don't know of any farmers who aren't willing. I don't know of any farmers who are not capable," Hancock said. "But what I do know is every farmer weighs how many pennies he can pull from every dollar to stay in business."