



Dea Theodore

District 6
DHTheodore@slco.org

John Bennett

Senior Policy Advisor
jobennett@slco.org
385-468-7456

July 1, 2023

Dear Governor Cox, President Adams, Speaker Wilson, and Great Salt Lake Commissioner Steed,

As you recall, I sent a letter to you around the middle of January regarding tree thinning as it relates to restoring the water levels of the Great Salt Lake.

<https://www.deseret.com/utah/2023/1/14/23552065/can-forest-thinning-help-great-salt-lake-legislature>

My letter sparked a lot of discussion among passionate and concerned individuals, organizations, news outlets, rural and farming communities, elected officials, and more. I appreciate the honest feedback and thank everyone for participating in these discussions.

When discussing the Great Salt Lake, it is crucial to remember that Mother Nature greatly influences our environment. She can bring drought that lasts for years but quickly shift and provide us with excessive snow and rain. We have seen firsthand how severe drought can turn into dangerous and costly flooding, erosion, and slides in a short period.

Due to recent dynamics, we must re-examine previously accepted "facts," such as "less water in the Great Salt Lake means less snow in the mountains." This generally accepted talking point was proven wrong last winter when we received record-breaking snow while the lake level was at a historical low.

<https://www.upr.org/utah-news/2021-09-10/the-great-salt-lake-is-low-what-does-this-mean-for-utahns>

Fortunately, the recent attention and debate regarding tree thinning and its relationship to the water levels of the Great Salt Lake have catapulted land and forest management to the top of public discourse.

Tree Thinning: A Forest Management Tool

Tree thinning is a valuable management tool for land and forests. By implementing tree thinning, we can fulfill our obligations to increase water yields, prevent wildfires, enhance wildlife habitat, and provide a haven for outdoor enthusiasts in remote or densely wooded areas. The following news stories and reports highlight this fact:

The Nature Conservancy has demonstrated that effective land management can increase water availability, even during drought.

<https://www.deseret.com/utah/2023/1/31/23578189/great-salt-lake-drought-shrinking-restoration-brings-more-birds-nature-conservancy>

While welcomed and prayed for, heavy precipitation and snowpack can lead to more undergrowth in already dense forests. This increases the risk and severity of wildfires.

<https://www.edf.org/blog/2019/04/29/all-snow-and-rain-year-california-could-face-even-worse-fire-season-heres-why>

Fewer Trees, More Water: Study Finds Runoff Boost from Forest Thinning

"A new study is the first to produce solid estimates of the hydrologic benefits of forest restoration work."

<https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/water/community/2018/05/07/fewer-trees-more-water-study-finds-runoff-boost-from-forest-thinning>

"The Nature Conservancy is a leading advocate of thinning our forests to restore a more natural, healthy balance and increase our water yield."

<https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/arizona/stories-in-arizona/restoring-arizonas-forests/>

When Trees became the Enemy "Why North American cities must thin overgrown forests to improve water supplies."

International Water Association

<https://www.thesourcemagazine.org/trees-became-enemy/>.

BLM Ely district Tree-Thinning part of large-scale Watershed Restoration

<https://www.blm.gov/press-release/blm-ely-district-tree-thinning-part-large-scale-watershed-restoration>

Tree Thinning As It Relates To wildfires

"Wildfires consume 50% more acres than in the past, Romney noted, blaming the lack of forest management, and pointing to the need to clear deadwood and to thin existing trees."

<https://www.deseret.com/2023/3/8/23631313/how-to-prevent-wildfires-global-warming-mitt-romney>

"Carbon pollution from California's 2020 wildfires erased 16 years of the state's greenhouse gas emission cuts, according to a new UCLA study."

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/californias-2020-wildfires-negated-years-of-emission-cuts/>

Wildfires damage infrastructures and the environment and put residents, homes, campers, hikers, trail runners, and tourists at risk of harm or death.

The Salt Lake Tribune reports that the Wasatch canyons receive approximately 9 million visitors per year. U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack warns that the forests are at high risk of wildfires, stating that it's not a matter of if but when fires will occur.

<https://www.sltrib.com/news/environment/2023/02/03/central-wasatch-trails-undergo/>

Exposure to wildfire while on the trail is a matter of life and death, and survival instructions warn hikers and outdoor enthusiasts, "Never try to outrun a wildfire; it just might be the last race of your life."

<https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2023-01-19/feds-send-930-million-to-curb-crisis-of-us-west-wildfires>

<https://www.onetigris.com/us/blog/post/story015/>

Strategic and focused forest thinning is beneficial as it creates meadows, fire breaks, and small forest openings that can be lifesaving for those who enjoy the outdoors. It is often safer for hikers caught on a mountain during a wildfire to stay put. Informed hikers can seek refuge and safety in these man-made meadows, fire breaks, and openings.

<https://www.onetigris.com/us/blog/post/story015/>

<https://laist.com/news/climate-environment/the-big-burn/how-to-survive-a-wildfire-tips>

Ensuring safe havens from wildfires in the mountainous regions of the Wasatch is of utmost importance as much of the area is at "high" wildfire risk. Moreover, Little Cottonwood and Millcreek Canyons lack secondary escape routes, while Big Cottonwood Canyon only has a seasonal, potentially insufficient route. Given the limited or non-existent escape options, creating well-planned, thinned, or cleared safety areas is vital to save lives.

<https://www.deseret.com/utah/2022/8/17/23308710/utah-deemed-most-vulnerable-in-west-homes-catch-fire-wildfire-risk-cottonwood-canyon-salt-lake>

Wildfire Danger And Canceled Homeowners Insurance

State Farm Insurance recently made the shocking announcement that they "...will no longer insure new homes and properties in California due to wildfire risks and rebuilding costs." Allstate quickly followed.

<https://abc7.com/california-state-farm-home-insurance-insure/13307693/>

Some Utahns brush this off, assuming homeowner policies in Utah will not be canceled. Unfortunately, it has already begun in Utah. American International Group (AIG) is canceling policies in Utah due to homes' proximity to wildfire areas.

Canceling policies for Utah homeowners and residents will have a devastating impact on many.

Action Items

1. Let's pinpoint the most critical zones that would benefit from strategic tree thinning to reduce the risk of wildfires and improve stream flows. Top hydrologists, wildfire specialists, public and private stakeholders, and interested individuals can help achieve this goal. The prioritized private and public lands will feature,

- *high elevations,*
- *proximal to stream channels,*
- *short distance to impermeable soil layers or bedrock,*
- *north slopes,*
- *riparian areas with invasive species present, and*
- *heavily wooded, high recreation lands*

2. Install instrumentation to measure the impact tree thinning has on water quantity.

3. Motivate private landowners who own important lands to join the tree-thinning and aspen restoration program. If needed, we can provide incentives to encourage participation. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/new-mexico-an-unlikely-wildfire-thinning-alliance-2023-05-19/>

4. A program should be established across the state to eliminate non-native trees that consume excessive water in our riparian zones. Instead, these trees should be replaced with native trees that require less water.

5. Direct the Jordan River Commission and the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands to assess the quantity of non-native, water-consuming trees and plants in the Jordan River Basin, such as tamarisk, phragmites, and Russian Olive. Additionally, they should develop a plan to replace non-native trees with native ones.

6. To promote safety in our canyons, it is important to involve the hiking and backcountry communities in the planning, execution, and education of safe zones.

7. It is important to keep involving and engaging the general public in the education, planning, and execution stages of forest management and wildfire safety.

8. Evaluate and update local ordinances to facilitate rather than hinder wise forest management if needed.

Funding Request

Maintaining and managing forests responsibly come at a significant cost. However, it is essential to carry out this work for various reasons, such as mitigating wildfires, ensuring clean water and air, and promoting public safety. Utah has already spent more than \$349 million in achieving these goals through its successful Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative.

<https://wri.utah.gov/wri/>

Starting in 2024, I am requesting \$100 million each year for five years to help stabilize the Lake, drastically improve our forest health, promote public safety and prevent wildfires. I suggest allocating these funds to the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) for projects in the Great Salt Lake watershed. Moreover, I recommend using some of the funds to enhance the forests and watersheds in Salt Lake County. Despite having successfully treated almost 2.4 million acres across Utah, the WRI's restoration efforts have not included Salt Lake County's Big and Little Cottonwood canyons.

<https://wri.utah.gov/wri/>. <https://wri.utah.gov/wri/map/map.html>. dea-theodore.com

Broad Public Support

I have received tremendous support and encouragement from respected organizations, individuals, and political figures from nearly every County in Utah. (See below) They endorse the idea of active forest management, including patterned tree thinning, as we seek to increase water yields, reduce wildfires, promote wildlife diversity, and ensure public safety. I am grateful for their support.

We value a diverse range of perspectives in public discussions and debates. However, we must be fact-based and cautious of harmful clickbait, misleading propaganda, and unreliable self-promoting "experts." I have created FACT SHEET #3, which answers many related questions. It can be found [HERE](#).

This summer, we are organizing field trips to areas in Utah where patterned tree thinning and wise forest management have been successfully implemented. The public and elected officials will be invited to attend and participate. Moreover, private landowners with forest lands have contacted me, expressing their interest in participating in tree-thinning projects. A review of their lands is underway.

I will keep you updated on our exciting progress and other developments.

If you have any questions or suggestions, don't hesitate to get in touch with me. A copy of this letter can also be found on my website here dea-theodore.com

Sincerely,



Dea Theodore
Salt Lake County Council

Special Thanks To:

Michael Styler - Prior Director of the Utah Department of Natural Resources - Millard
Rep. Carl Albrecht - Emery, Grand, Sanpete, Sevier
Rep. Ken Ivory - SLCo
Rep. Tim Jimenez - Tooele Co.
Rep. Trevor Lee - Davis Co.
Rep. Phil Lyman - Beaver, Garfield, Kane, Piute, San Juan, Sevier, Wayne
Tracy Killian - Duchesne County Commission
Dennis Blackburn - Wayne County Commission
John E. Laursen - Uintah County Commission
Shawn Milne - Bear River Association of Governments (Box Elder, Cache, and Rich Counties)
Justin Hunt - San Juan County
Ben Burr - Washington Co
Simone Griffin - Garfield Co
Greg Jensen - Sevier County Commissioner
Wade Hollingshead - Kane County Commissioner
Celeste Meyeres - Kane County Commissioner
Dennis Blackburn - Wayne County Commissioner
Bruce Adams - San Juan County Commissioner
Paulina Flint - Community Activist
Darin Bushman - Piute County Commissioner
Iron County Farm Bureau
Mike Siaperas - SLCo/Carbon
Goud Maragani - Log Cabin Republicans, President - SLCo
John Bennett - Sr. Policy Advisor to Salt Lake County Council Member Dea Theodore - SLCo
Paul Cozzens, Iron County
Marilyn Wood, Iron County
Kane County Farm Bureau
Sevier County Farm Bureau
Millard County Farm Bureau
Sanpete County Farm Bureau
Washington County Farm Bureau
Wade Eliason, Vice President Utah Farm Bureau
Brandon Yardley, Beaver County Commissioner
Blue Ribbon Coalition
Wade Hollingshead Beaver County Commissioner
Wade Heaton, Kane County Commissioner
Mike Bleak, Iron County
Utah Public Lands Council
Patty Kubeja, Kane County Commissioner
Kane County Commission
Dea Theodore - SLCo County Council
John Anderson - SLCo
Jeremy Bendixen - SLCo
Wayne Crawford - SLCo
Pauline Crawford - SLCo
Nick Crawford - SLCo
Ashley Crawford - SLCo
Cyle Buxton - SLCo
Jake Buxton - SLCo

Zach Buxton- SLCo
Scott Miler - SLCo
Sharon Miller - SLCo
Tammy Pearson - Beaver County Commissioner
Clinton Painter - Juab County Commissioner
Scott Bartholomew - Sanpete County Commissioner
Marvin Kenison - Juab County Commissioner
Shelley Brennan - Duchesne County Recorder

