

Guarding the lake

Tribune Editorial, December 12, 2008

A land swap proposed by Great Salt Lake Minerals Corp. and the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands appears to be, as the company describes it, a "win-win" agreement. We can see no reason to oppose it. But, while trading to the company about 37,000 acres on the lake's northwest side for just more than 30,000 acres of wildlife habitat currently leased by Great Salt Lake Minerals on the lake's north shoreline is a short-term bargain for both parties, what's needed is a comprehensive plan for the lake's future. Until scientific research tells us how commercial development and wildlife can best co-exist on the lake and a governing board is formed to put the science into policy, any decision could lead to compounded problems in the future.

Gov. Jon Huntsman created the Great Salt Lake Advisory Council in August. The group of legislators and others in government, industry and environmental preservation has been meeting to discuss the diverse needs and potential of the lake. But a lake commission, similar to those that manage other large American lakes and waterways, is needed to develop an overall plan.

Without a commission that has authority to set policy for the lake, piecemeal decisions will continue to be the order of the day.

The evaporation ponds where Great Salt Lake Minerals extracts sulphate of potash, a fertilizer used by farmers to increase yields of vegetables, fruit, nuts and turf grasses, use pure solar energy, making it a low-energy business, the type we want to encourage in Utah. But the commercial operation can disrupt the migratory and nesting habits of a variety of birds and waterfowl and upset the delicate ecosystem of the lake.

The lake is already facing what might be the beginning of a trend toward decreased lake volume that could have a tremendous effect on salinity and vegetation along the lake shore. The water levels at Locomotive Springs north of the lake are dropping, and that could be a canary-in-the-coal-mine warning.

A separate lake commission is needed to oversee and monitor all activities, both human-caused and natural, that have an impact on the wildlife that depend on the lake. Right now, federal, state and local agencies each look after their own separate lake-related function, but nobody is constantly looking at the big picture.

This iconic treasure needs knowledgeable overseers dedicated to maintaining it as a healthy natural resource.