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Opinion

Great Salt Lake expansion plan works

By Kerry W. Gibson

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Great Salt Lake Minerals Corp.'s expansion plan presents the state of Utah with a unique opportunity -- the chance to make America's diet healthier, Utah's economy stronger and the Great Salt Lake's future more promising.

In a nutshell, GSL wishes to build up to 75,000 acres of new solar evaporation ponds over the next decades, almost entirely on the desolate northwest corner of the lake, to produce more sulfate of potash fertilizer. GSL is the only American producer of this fertilizer, which is essential for growing vegetables, fruits and other healthy food crops. The project's new jobs would pour millions of dollars into the local economy and the fertilizer production would bring millions of dollars of royalties to the state.

It would be the biggest project ever on the lake, with extraordinary public benefits -- particularly as these difficult economic times threaten our most important programs.

The problem for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the lead agency considering GSLMC's permit application, is that orderly review is being disrupted by a handful of critics with unsubstantiated claims, bad math and misinformation about so-called possible effects of the expansion, without a true vision for the lake's future.

The truth is, for the past 50 years the northwest corner of the lake has been more desert than lake. There are no plants. No fresh water. No fish. No migratory birds. No brine shrimp. It is the perfect place for solar evaporation ponds that would have no perceptible impact on any life form. Anyone who saw the floods here 25 years ago knows that the lake level can rise or fall several feet each year and changes cyclically over time. GSL has been operating for 40 years through high water and low, proof enough that their ponds have no apparent effect on lake level.

Fears that new ponds will jeopardize the pelicans of Gunnison Island seem even more ludicrous. The nearest levee would be a full three miles from any point of the island. How can that be a "land bridge for predators" as some have claimed?

The bulk of the acreage in the expansion plan comes from a lease exchange agreement between Great Salt Lake Minerals and the Utah Department of Natural Resources. GSLMC received leases on 38,000 acres on the lake's northwest arm in exchange for relinquishing undeveloped leases it had held since 1967 on 30,000 acres around Promontory Point, more valuable to wildlife and the lake's ecology.

This is not an isolated incident. GSLMC and the state have made previous win-win arrangements to ensure that the company's operations would not affect the bird population. The company has coexisted with an adjacent bird habitat for decades, has purchased water rights to provide an annual supply of water for Harold Crane Wildlife Management Area, and has agreed not to develop 2,000 adjacent leased acres. GSLMC has never been cited for a single wildlife violation.

As a Utah legislator, I see GSLMC's expansion as an opportunity for new government revenue -- and more good jobs -- when state and county budgets are severely pinched.

As a dairy and crop farmer, I see the expansion as an opportunity to strengthen American agriculture by securing a chemical-free, sustainable supply of a nutrient necessary for growing wholesome food crops.

As a fifth-generation resident living near the lake, as well as a member of the House Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment Committee, I see the expansion as an opportunity to generate funds for new programs addressing the lake's real problems: pollution, invasive plants that ruin nesting areas and selenium.

The Great Salt Lake is our state treasure. For years, legislators and governors of both parties have worked together to manage the lake in the public interest, with the mandated goal of preserving its ecology while balancing the needs of wildlife, recreation and the economy. All the acreage in GSLMC's expansion plan is designated by the state as acreage that could be used for mineral activity.

I urge the Corps of Engineers to consider the plan's public benefit to all Utah citizens.

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