

# Deseret News

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## Utah's Loneliest job?

Plenty to do,  
but no people  
for miles from  
solitary post



BARTON GLÄSSER, DESERET NEWS

Todd Stimpson works for GSL Minerals, helping harvest sulfate of potash from the Great Salt Lake. He lives in isolation while he works.

**By Joseph M. Dougherty**  
Deseret News

LAKESIDE — Todd Stimpson really should go to sleep earlier. The bed has an exquisite pull at 2:30 a.m. "Stay," it seems to say as he pulls the covers back, curs-

ing himself for hitting the sack at 10:30 p.m. Leesa, Stimpson's wife of 10 years, barely notices when half of their bed is emptied of her husband's form. A brief kiss 30 minutes later is her only alert that her husband is leaving.

He'll be back in just over two days.

A tanned Stimpson pulls his Toyota Tacoma to the street, leaving behind the sweet, earthy scent of Nibley farmland south of Logan for the briny air of the

Great Salt Lake. It will be hours before he gets to his home away from home on the lake's west side, where he works in solitude for days at a time at one of the

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Todd Stimpson catches up on the news via satellite television in the trailer he lives in while he's on duty at the lake.

## LONELY

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most remote locations in the state.

Few people know that Stimpson's job exists, and fewer still have seen the place that amounts to his corner cubicle — a desolate chunk of Utah in the middle of nowhere — but Stimpson's got a job as important as any farmer in the circle of life. He helps produce a much sought-after fertilizer used to grow fruit and berry crops and to keep lawns healthy and green.

On this cool July morning outside of Stimpson's Nibley home, the mountains of Cache Valley are charcoal against the purple sky. The brilliant full moon rakes across the landscape. It will still be hours before the faintest hint of dawn arrives in the east.

This early, the roads

between home and the lakeshore at Great Salt Lake Minerals' production plant west of Ogden — where Stimpson switches his gear to a company truck — are nearly empty.

His checklist: three spare tires, food to get him through the trip, engine parts, tools and a full gas tank. He needs to get it now, because he's not going to see another human for a couple of days.

Stimpson and co-worker Brad Bryner take turns living alone in a white mobile home on the lake's west side. Neither leaves the company outpost next to thousands of acres of water until the other arrives. Their maintenance skills keep pumps running that feed thousands of acres of shallow evaporation ponds, which produce more than 400,000 tons of sulfate of potash each year.

Sulfate of potash provides the potassium that robust

citrus, berry, tomato, potato and other crops crave. And it does its job without being high in chloride, like other sources of potassium.

Stimpson and Bryner work for GSL Minerals as B-plus operators, which means that the company — the largest North American producer of sulfate of potash — trusts Stimpson and one other employee to ensure operations on the west side of the Great Salt Lake function the way they should.

It could be Utah's loneliest job.

## A solitary drive

There's one direct route from GSL's operations to the evaporation ponds on the lake's west side: along the Union Pacific's 50-year-old railroad causeway that extends across the lake, just touching the point of the Promontory Mountains. It's a road few Utahns have ever taken.

During the two-hour drive from one side of the lake to the other, there isn't much to do but listen to the radio. Though there's no posted speed limit, the best Stimpson can hope for is 40 mph on the jostling road next to the tracks.

The 46-year-old Stimpson carries three spare tires in the bed of his pickup because he once had to change two flat tires during his drive across the lake. This is a place where, depending on your location, the water is green, blue, white or gray. And in the northwest arm of the lake, a kind of algae in the water tints it red. It's

so remote, the bugs don't even hang around. But salt is evident everywhere: It's granular just inches under the water, crusty along canal edges, solid chunks that look like ice where it's been removed and weathered, and its smell is everywhere in the air.

### Punching the clock

The mobile home Stimpson and Bryner take turns living in sits atop the stark black dike that contains the western ponds just northwest of the place known as Lakeside, in Box Elder County.

The home is fully furnished with two private, locking bedrooms, full kitchen, one bathroom, satellite television service and a one-gallon jug of sunscreen, which Stimpson lathers on thick every day during the summer. Decked out in a T-shirt, denim overalls, boots, sunglasses and a Stetson, Stimpson nearly looks the part of a middle-aged, soft-spoken cattle rancher. His salt-and-pepper mustache matches his hair.

The evaporation process takes three years: one year under Stimpson's careful watch and measurements, and two years in ponds on the east side of the lake.

After water is pumped from the lake into a pond, it begins evaporating, which increases the salinity of the pond's brine. When the evaporation process is complete, workers remove the sulfate of potash, clean it and ship it in 100-ton-minimum shipments to fertilizer companies and agricultural suppliers throughout the U.S.

GSL relies on Stimpson to make sure water can get from the lake into the ponds. In a typical day, he performs maintenance on pumps, fixes their engines, changes their oil and flushes salt buildup from pumps.

Stimpson puts in two solid days of work and heads home when Bryner shows up in the



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Todd Stimpson measures water levels on the west bank of the Great Salt Lake on June 4. Stimpson spends days at a time working alone monitoring pumps and evaporation pools.

morning. Then he's home for two days and works the next three.

The hardest part of Stimpson's job isn't the isolation. After all, this is a guy who wanted to be a cattle rancher when he grew up.

The separation from his family is tougher to deal with, he said, though the twice-weekly reunions with his family are happy ones. He talks to them throughout the day and plans activities with his 9-year-old daughter.

The isolation, though, means that GSL needs to be especially aware of Stimpson's well-being and safety. He's required to check in four times a day via radio to the main office. And if he doesn't, they call him.

Other than that, and a scraggly black cat that has been living near the station for 15 years, he's totally on his own.

### Sunset

After a day of patrolling dikes looking for cracks, maintaining machinery and driving the endless miles, Stimpson finally gets to relax in front of sunsets so captivating that he's purchased a camera to document them.

Eventually, the sun sinks below the horizon and Stimpson is left with dusk that fades into twilight, the quiet and the occasional faint sound of

a train trekking across the causeway.

It's late when he turns in for the night because, as he says, "The main thing is that I get my job done."

And there's satisfaction in being the company handyman in the middle of nowhere, because Stimpson knows he's the one who starts potassium on its journey from Utah to fruit baskets and lawns around the United States.

"Knowing good things are coming out of here, it makes you want to do a better job," Stimpson says during a recent break. "I know I'm helping out."

And once GSL's plans to build 75,000 acres of evaporation ponds north of Lakeside — currently being reviewed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — pan out, Stimpson is probably going to get some help.

For now, when the job is done for the night, he can relax in front of the multiplicity of channels from the satellite or with his stack of videotapes of rodeo bloopers.

And then, in the bedroom on the right, the one sporting a stack of 15 12-packs of Diet Dr Pepper, sleep finally comes.

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