

2024 Wetlands Report - Executive Summary



Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge @KenKraus

Since its inception, the Utah Inland Port Authority (UIPA) has operated under a cloud of opposition from the public and suspicion that its activities would not serve the public interest.

Concerns over port generated diesel pollution and truck traffic prompted multiple events of civil disobedience at its early public meetings. A revolving door with its director and board members, poor fiscal practices, and a collapse of the justification for its signature acquisition, land leased for a Salt Lake City transloading facility, have culminated in an alteration of its strategy

into something much different than what was broadcast for the original SLC port site in 2018.

This current strategy of offering publicly subsidized port sites to multiple local jurisdictions through-out the state, many along the Wasatch Front, some of which are directly on top of, or near-by Great Salt Lake (GSL) wetlands, only deepens the disconnect between UIPA's actions and what is in the common good for Utah residents and taxpayers.

UIPA frequently makes vague claims that development in these areas is inevitable, and with their involvement the end result will be better environmental protection. But building construction in wetland areas is costly and necessary infrastructure is usually non-existent. Without public subsidy, these areas are not likely to become industrialized or otherwise developed.

Most alarming has been UIPA subsidizing the creation of “project areas” that will likely be primarily massive distribution warehouse farms, positioned close to or on top of Great Salt Lake wetlands. Since our previous report from one year ago, UIPA has expanded the size and number of “project areas” such that now over 77,000 acres of GSL wetlands will be impaired or could even be destroyed by UIPA projects in Tooele, Spanish Fork, and Box Elder, Salt Lake and Weber counties.

Wetlands are an essential component of the GSL ecosystem and they are hydrologically connected to the lake itself. State lawmakers talk as if they understand the imperative of saving GSL, but at the same time, through UIPA, they are fostering a system of taxpayer subsidies that will consume more of the lake's water, and damage or destroy large tracts of its wetlands.

Natural wetlands are resources that cannot be duplicated by “wetland banking” or creation of artificial wetlands elsewhere. They are an essential resource for wildlife, including 12 million birds that stop at the lake during their hemispheric migrations. They

filter and sequester contaminants like heavy metals and toxic chemicals from water. They utilize excess nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus. They serve as highly effective carbon sinks, helping to mitigate the climate crisis.

UIPA's projects near wetlands will increase air pollution in at least five ways. If these ports are successful, it would mean a massive increase in goods imported and exported from the state. More goods shipped mean more fossil fuel emissions whether from trucks, trains, or airplanes. Loss of wetlands means loss of their pollution absorption. Acres of new asphalt means more VOCs, ozone, and particulate pollution just from the asphalt. More water consumption means a smaller GSL, a larger solar reflective lakebed and more catalyzed formation of ozone. A smaller GSL means more dust storms.

Industrial and residential development will increase human presence in prime mosquito habitat, virtually guaranteeing more pressure to use more insecticides to suppress mosquitoes. Those pesticides are now recognized as more dangerous than ever before and more toxic chemicals will drift over to the heavily populated areas of the Wasatch Front. Calculating human health hazards from pesticides has changed dramatically given the evidence that pesticide formulas often include highly toxic "forever chemical" molecules.

Noise and light pollution from these project areas will further harm both humans and wildlife.

When boasting about the economic potential of UIPA's projects, UIPA conveniently overlooks the economic repercussions of all the consequences we detail in this report. We believe considering all these factors forces the conclusion that UIPA's projects and very existence is a large net negative for the vast majority of Utah residents, now and in the future. Clean air would be a much stronger economic stimulus than a UIPA network of industrial sites.

If there is any optimism among port critics that these harmful scenarios may be overestimated, it is due to the likelihood that the more recent iteration of UIPA's business model, a multi-site network of ports, is just as non-viable as its original. As our commissioned review of UIPA's plans by an academic logistics expert detailed two years ago, UIPA's aspirations of turning Utah into an international logistics hub has little chance for success because for international shippers operating from the West Coast, proximity to population centers is what matters, not Utah's central location in the sparsely populated western region. If that forecast is correct, then the end result will be that significant taxpayer money will have been wasted to help fund the construction of huge industrial centers and warehouse farms that are unused and/or underused, but unequivocally unnecessary. But most of the environmental damage will have been done and be permanent.

For all these reasons, on behalf of concerned community members throughout Utah, we call for a halt to state subsidized industrial development in, and adjacent to, Great Salt Lake wetlands.