

Emery County Public Lands Council

Regular Meeting Minutes

Date: January 6, 2026

Time: 10:00 A.M.

Location: Emery County Courthouse, Canyon Conference Room

Attendance:

- **Council Members Present:** Varian Allen, Kim McFarlane, Rod Player, Les Wilberg, Leon McElprang, Ben Grimes, Bradford Richman
- **Council Members Absent:** Patrick Sundstrom
- **Others Present (Staff / Agencies / Public):** Jim Jennings (ECPL), Jan Olsen (Assistant) Commissioner Jordan Leonard, Commissioner Dennis Worwood, Commissioner Keven Jensen, Nicole Nielson (PLPCO), Kyle Beagley (BLM), Hunter Hamm and Nathan Christensen (BLM Law Enforcement), Jaron Hansen (UFBF), Chris Wood (DNR), Cash Stallings (DWR), Dal Grey (DOGM), Terri & Don Bennett, Darren Olsen (USFS), Julie Johansen (ETV), Joel Brown (Senator Lee), Larry Ellertson (Senator Curits), Ron Dunn (Kennedy) Ed Geary, Tom Hansen
- **Electronically:** Sheriff Tyson Huntington, Ben Grimes, and Joel Brown

1. Call to Order / Welcome

Chairman Rod Player called the meeting to order at approximately 10:00 a.m. and welcomed attendees. A quorum was present.

2. Approval of Minutes

December 2, 2025 – Regular Meeting Minutes

The Council discussed corrections needed due to duplicated text and clarification of motion/second names.

Motion: Approve the December 2, 2025 minutes with noted duplications removed and corrections made.

Moved: Varian Allen

Seconded: Kim McFarland

Vote: Approved unanimously.

3. Council Leadership

Chairman

Motion: Nominate Rod Player to serve as Chairman for an additional one-year term.

Moved/Seconded: Varian Allen / Craig Johansen

Vote: Approved unanimously.

Vice Chairman

Motion: Nominate Varian Allen to serve as Vice Chairman.

Moved: Leon Michael Pring

Seconded: Craig Johansen

Vote: Approved unanimously.

4. Council Member Comments

Chairman Player raised concerns regarding increasing beaver activity along the San Rafael River corridor (Fuller Bottom to Swinging Bridge), including:

- Downed trees blocking trails
- Impacts on livestock movement and grazing permits
- Safety and access issues for horsemen

The discussion included clarification of wilderness restrictions, trapping limitations, the ecological benefits of beavers, and prior mitigation efforts. Agency representatives expressed willingness to coordinate a site visit and further evaluate management options.

Additional comments included:

- Emergency preparedness concerns related to battery storage facilities and solar projects
 - Road maintenance conditions on Buckhorn Draw Road and county maintenance schedules
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5. Agency Reports

Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF)

Ryan Jones reported on several active and upcoming programs:

- The **Water Optimization Grant Program** is currently open. Canal companies may apply for up to \$1,000,000, and private agricultural producers up to \$500,000, covering up to 50% of eligible project costs. Projects may be standalone or partnered with NRCS funding.
- The **Soil Health in the West Conference** will be held February 10–12, 2026, in St. George, focusing on soil health practices and agricultural sustainability.
- The annual **Local Working Group Meeting** for regional conservation districts (Price River, San Rafael, and Green River) is scheduled for January 12, 2026, at 6:00 p.m. in Green River City Hall. The meeting helps identify local natural resource priorities and guides future NRCS funding decisions.
- The **Agricultural Programs Fair** will be held February 18, 2026, from 5:30–8:30 p.m. at the Jennifer Leavitt Student Center in Price, featuring presentations on

water optimization, nutrient management, conservation easements, farm succession, and related programs.

- A **USU Extension Beef Field Day** is scheduled in Price, with registration required.

Utah Division of Water Rights (DWR)

Cash Stallings provided a regional and basin-wide water update:

- Snowpack levels are significantly below average across the Price River, San Rafael, Muddy, and Desolation Canyon basins, ranging from approximately 57% to 75% of normal.
- Despite low snowpack, local reservoirs remain relatively full and are expected to supply irrigation needs for the upcoming season unless dry conditions persist into subsequent years.
- Lake Powell and Lake Mead storage levels remain critically low.
- Ongoing negotiations regarding the **Colorado River Compact** have not produced an agreement. Federal agencies may impose interim management decisions if the seven basin states fail to reach consensus.
- The current interim guidelines expire on October 1, 2026, creating uncertainty regarding future water management. Legislative activity related to water policy is anticipated during the upcoming session.

Manti-La Sal National Forest

District Ranger Darren Olson provided updates on forest operations and recreation:

- Seasonal wildlife gates close on January 1 and are scheduled to reopen on April 15, with additional gates closing during the spring mud season as conditions warrant.
- A **Lakes Timber Sale** in the Muddy Creek drainage is planned for March 2026, continuing implementation of previously approved projects.
- The **Forest Plan Revision** is nearing release for public review, with an extended comment period anticipated.
- Improvements at **Joe's Valley Campground** are underway, including the installation of new picnic tables, fire rings, and extended campsites, all funded through GOED grants.
- **Meadow Gulch Road Reroute**: NEPA compliance is complete. The Forest Service is seeking funding to begin reroute construction to improve long-term access and reduce maintenance issues.
- Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) proposals are being developed for habitat and watershed projects, primarily on the south end of the forest.
- Grazing permit renewals, fuel reduction pile burning, and winter operations are ongoing.

Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR)

Chris Wood (DWR) reported on seasonal activities:

- WRI proposal development is underway with partners to improve habitat and watershed conditions.

- Wildlife officers are actively monitoring trapping activity and winter recreation areas.
- Ice fishing conditions are improving on Mammoth, Cleveland, Scofield, and Electric Lake.
- Big game monitoring includes GPS collaring of deer to study winter mortality causes.
- A new shed antler collection regulation is in effect January 1–May 31, requiring completion of a free ethics and education course prior to collecting sheds.

Utah Division of Oil, Gas, and Mining (DOGM)

Dal Gray was unable to attend. Written updates indicated that the State’s carbon sequestration primacy application has been submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Kyle Beagley representatives reported:

- **Wilderness Management:**
 - Hand tools are allowed in wilderness areas.
- Mechanized tools are prohibited under the Wilderness Act.
 - Use of explosives was discussed and characterized as unsafe, industrial in nature, and inconsistent with wilderness designation.
- **Public Lands Law Enforcement:**
 - Law enforcement staffing remains extremely limited given the size of public lands.
 - Concerns include increased recreation use, long-term squatting, trash accumulation, and livestock theft.
- **Interagency Coordination:**
 - Cross-deputization agreements between BLM, Forest Service, and Emery County Sheriff’s Office were discussed.
 - Continued efforts are underway to strengthen cooperation and training among agencies.
- **Funding Challenges:**
 - Vacant positions remain difficult to fill.
 - Council members were encouraged to communicate concerns to state and federal legislators to help prioritize funding and staffing.

Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office (PLPCO)

Nicole Nelsen provided legislative updates, including:

- **SB44** – Annual update to Utah’s State Resource Management Plan, which has already passed committee.
 - Monitoring of additional public lands legislation is expected to be introduced as the legislative session begins.
 - Emphasis on advocating for local government involvement and consistency with county general plans.
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Washington Delegation Staff

Washington delegation staff provided updates on federal legislation and policy matters, including:

- **Fix Our Forests Act**, which advanced out of committee with bipartisan support.
 - Federal land management and co-management efforts.
 - Energy policy, including coal, gas, nuclear, and renewable energy considerations.
 - Federal appropriations and ongoing challenges related to funding for public lands management and law enforcement.
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6. Commission Comments on Public Land Items

Commission representatives discussed:

- County road maintenance priorities
 - Budget constraints impacting remote road upkeep
 - Coordination with industry users contributing to road maintenance
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7. Additional Issues from Council Members

- Continued discussion of road conditions, maintenance frequency, and jurisdictional responsibility
 - Emphasis on balancing tax impacts with service levels
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8. Concerned Citizens

No formal public comments were presented. Representatives from Utah Farm Bureau shared concerns on behalf of affected permittees regarding river access and grazing impacts.

9. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 12:15 p.m.

Submitted by: _____Jan Olsen_____

Approved by: Emery County Public Lands Council