

Emery County Public Lands Council

Meeting Minutes

Meeting Date: April 7, 2026

Time: 10:00 A.M.

Location: Emery County Courthouse, Canyon Conference Room

<https://zoom.us/j/4353813570?pwd=NWduRlZzRCtGNlUdnd1d0NkNNdmxIZz09#success>

Public Lands Council: Rod Player, Varian Allen, Les Wilberg, Ben Grimes, Patrick Sundstrom, Brad Richman, Kim McFarlane, Craig Johansen

Absent: Sheriff Tyson Huntington

Administration: Jim Jennings, Natalie Olsen

Commission: Keven Jensen, Dennis Worwood, Jordan Leonard

Agencies: Kyle Beagley, Tom Heinlein & Elijah Waters (BLM), Nathan (State Parks), Dal Gray (DOGM), Colton Taylor, Elam Rees(DWR), Darren Olsen(USFS), Brian Torgerson (SITLA), Chris Wood, Cash Stallings (DWR), Dana Dean, Karin Madsen, Dal Gray, Todd Miller & Kendra Hinten (DOGM)

Washington: Larry Ellertson (Senator Curtis)

Public: Don & Terri Bennett, Wayne Ludington, Ed Geary, Tom Hansen, Trent Young, Kenzie Young, Bill Fasselin,

1. Call to Order / Welcome

- Rod Player, Chairman, called the meeting to order.

2. Approval of Minutes

- Prior meeting: March 3, 2026, Regular Meeting
- Motion by: Varian Allen Seconded by: Brad Richman Vote: Unanimous

3. Presentation from Evan Rees on the Habitat Restoration Projects:

Will be discussed under the Division of Wildlife Resources agency report.

4. Discuss/Approve/Deny Recommendation to the Commission on the Habitat Restoration Project.

Kim made a motion to recommend support for the habitat restoration project with the stipulation that it does not negatively impact grazing rights with a second from Leon. Voting was unanimous, motion passed.

5. Discuss/Approve/Deny the Mountain Dew Trail Letter.

The Council discussed the Mountain Dew Trail located on the west side of Cedar Mountain, beginning near the Buckhorn Reservoir dam and forming a loop back to Buckhorn Road.

- The trail is currently open at both ends but closed in the middle, creating confusion.
- The route is heavily used by the public, including full-size vehicles, ATVs, motorcycles, and equestrian users.
- Emery County has performed maintenance on the open portions.

- Despite frequent use, the middle section is technically closed, placing users at risk of unintentionally violating regulations.

Council members noted that:

- The closure appears to be an oversight or mapping inconsistency by the BLM.
- BLM signage exists on the closed portion, but discussions with BLM staff suggest it may be an error dating back to older travel management planning (circa 2008).
- Increased recreation and campground use in the area have amplified traffic concerns, making the route more important for dispersing use.

The original request was for the Public Lands Council to recommend that the County Commission send a letter to the BLM requesting review and correction of the route designation.

BLM Response:

A representative from the BLM (Price Field Office) stated that:

- A formal letter from the County Commission is not necessary at this time.
- The BLM will research the issue internally and evaluate options for correcting the route designation.
- The BLM agreed to report back to the Council at the next meeting with findings and potential solutions.

6. Agency Reports

- **Utah State Department of Agriculture:**

No one in attendance

- **Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation**

No one in attendance

- **Utah Division of Water Rights (DWRe)**

A detailed legislative and water conditions update was provided by Cash Stallings.

- **Legislative Updates:**

- New law prevents forfeiture of certain water rights held, leased, or contracted by conservancy districts in Washington County.
- Restrictions placed on non-state entities filing water rights for fish and habitat in the Lower Colorado Basin.
- Updates to diligence claims allow alternative proof of pre-statutory water use where homestead patent documentation is unavailable.
- Creation of a **“Dedicated Water Application”**, allowing temporary dedication of water to the Great Salt Lake or Colorado River with specific use limitations and prioritized processing.
- Agricultural water optimization consultation requirements changed from mandatory to optional.
- New water leasing program established for state agencies, including funding for Great Salt Lake water acquisition.
- Colorado River Authority moved under the Department of Natural Resources with expanded authority, including legal standing.
- Geothermal amendments clarified ownership, lowered qualifying temperature threshold, and defined reporting requirements.
- New requirement for entities exacting water to submit a 40-year water use plan to justify needs.

- **Water Supply Outlook:**
 - Conditions described as unprecedentedly poor, with the lowest snowpack recorded since records began in 1930.
 - The current year is significantly worse than 2015.
- **Colorado River Update:**
 - No agreement among the seven basin states; negotiations have largely stalled.
 - Likely federal intervention through Bureau of Reclamation operations.
 - Anticipated reduction in water releases to preserve power generation levels.
 - Potential for interstate litigation, particularly from Arizona, regarding compact obligations.
 - Utah has allocated \$5 million for potential legal action related to water disputes.
- **Curtailment Outlook:**
 - Curtailment is not expected in the immediate future unless:
 1. A seven-state agreement is reached, or
 2. A court order mandates action.
 - Officials encouraged continued planning and preparation for potential future curtailment.
- **Utah State Parks: Nathan**
 - The park has entered its busy season with campgrounds filling and increased visitation.
 - The golf course remained open through winter and saw increased use due to other course closures.
 - Seasonal hiring is underway.

Additional updates included:

- High visitation at Goblin Valley State Park, with campgrounds frequently full.
- Multiple search and rescue responses, including a recent flash flood incident at Little Wild Horse Canyon where all individuals were safely evacuated.

- **Manti-La Sal National Forest (MLNF) Darren**

Forest Plan:

Ongoing work with tribal consultation; objections expected by July.

Seasonal Conditions:

- Snowpack is significantly below normal, with conditions 1 - 1.5 months ahead of schedule.
- Many gates and access points are opening earlier than usual.
- Campgrounds are being prepared, though staffing is limited due to early season conditions.

Grazing:

- Livestock operators have been asked to reduce use by 10–20% due to drought conditions.
- Flexibility will depend on spring and summer moisture.

Projects & NEPA (CEs):

- Stream restoration work ongoing.

- Gravel pit development for road maintenance.
- Proposed non-motorized trail development, including Middle Mountain, with coordination with grazing permittees.

Other Updates:

- Continued mining-related activity, including exploratory drilling and infrastructure proposals.
- Preliminary discussions regarding a land exchange near Cleveland Reservoir to improve access and recreation opportunities.
- Announcement of potential relocation of the U.S. Forest Service Chief's office to Salt Lake City.

Discussion:

Questions were raised about road maintenance funding and coordination with counties.

A request was made for the Forest Service to provide:

- Annual funding amounts for road maintenance.
- Frequency of grading and maintenance activities.

Action:

The Forest Service agreed to return next month with detailed information.

Additional discussion requested on law enforcement coordination.

● **Trust Lands Administration (TLA) Bryan**

Updates included:

- Completion of coal tract transfer to Emery Valley Resources, allowing expansion by Wolverine Fuels.
- Royalty rate adjustments to support fossil rock mine operations.
- Two right-of-entry permits under consideration for industrial development near Sunnyside and Green River.

Grazing Fees:

- 2026–2027 grazing rates increased approximately 2.5%:
 - Scattered sections: \$7.42 per AUM
 - Block lands: \$12.91 per AUM

Discussion:

- Concerns were raised by council members regarding fee increases during poor forage conditions.
- Comparisons between private and SITLA grazing conditions were discussed, with concerns about cost fairness and operational burdens on permittees.

● **Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR)**

Proposal presented by Even Rees for a **pinyon-juniper (PJ) removal project** in coordination with BLM near Bear Creek Campground.

- Project goals:
 - Improve mule deer and rangeland habitat

- Support pinyon jay habitat amid potential endangered species listing
- Conduct a small-scale research study (~10 acres of county land)
- Methods include:
 - Pre- and post-treatment monitoring
 - Mechanical mastication and reseeded
- Considerations discussed:
 - Temporary grazing impacts due to seeding/rest periods
 - Importance of maintaining livestock movement corridors
- The Council expressed support for the project, with a recommendation to inform County Commissioners.

Update from Chris:

A gill net survey was recently conducted at Huntington North Reservoir, showing a healthy population of Rainbow trout, Wipers and Catfish in the area. Both Huntington North Reservoir and Millsite Reservoir have been stocked for the spring season, with good fishing expected throughout the spring months.

The National Archery in the Schools Program State Championship (3D target event) was recently held in Price:

- Huntington Elementary School placed 2nd
- Canyon View Middle School placed 3rd

DWR noted that Grant funding is available for schools interested in starting an archery program. Schools must have teacher sponsors and coaches to participate

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

Dal Gray: The Environmental Protection Agency has approved an aquifer exemption for a gas operator in Ferron. This approval allows the operator to move forward with applications for a saltwater disposal well associated with their operations.

The project is expected to be a long-term process and will not proceed immediately.

Additional details:

- Disposal is planned in the Navajo Sandstone formation.
- Estimated disposal depth is approximately 2,500 feet.
- The well is anticipated to be classified as a Class II disposal well

Dana Dean - Deputy Director for the mining program, introduced staff members in attendance:

- Todd Miller – Coal Program Manager
- Kendra Hinton – Assistant Manager
- Karen Madsen – Biologist/Inspector
- Representatives from Wolverine Fuels were also present to assist with technical questions.

A1 Lithium Project Update

- AI Lithium applied in 2024 for three exploration wells; one was approved and completed:
 - The Boise-Dava well was permitted in February 2024.
 - A drilling blowout occurred but was quickly contained, with no environmental contamination reported.
- The well produced and tested brine through 2024–2025 and is currently shut in.
- A pilot project successfully demonstrated direct lithium extraction technology, allowing lithium to be extracted without evaporation ponds and with reinjection of water into the aquifer.
- Additional developments:
 - A second well (Mountain Fuel Skyline Geyser Well) drilled in late 2025 was unsuccessful and plugged/abandoned.
 - The company is pursuing a small mine permit (~20 acres) for:
 - Processing facilities
 - Three disposal wells
 - A full-scale lithium extraction plant
 - The project area straddles Emery and Grand Counties.
 - Exploration permits remain confidential; future mine permit applications will be publicly available.

Skyline Mine / Water Management Discussion

- Skyline Mine is not currently mining, but operations have not been abandoned.
- Current efforts are focused on water management and maintaining water supply to Electric Lake.
- Key points discussed:
 - Water is being pumped from the mine at approximately:
 - 3,500 gallons per minute (main discharge point)
 - 1,400 gallons per minute (JC1 well)
 - Discharge resumed in March after a temporary shutdown in February.
 - Water quality is currently in compliance with permit requirements.
- Clarifications:
 - No water is currently being discharged into Schofield Reservoir.
 - The system is not considered a direct “closed loop” (i.e., not simply cycling water from the lake back into the mine).
 - Water movement appears to be influenced by geologic formations and fault systems, not a direct connection.
- Discussion topics and concerns:
 - Whether the system could eventually reach equilibrium (balance of pressure and water levels).
 - Whether the mine could act as a long-term water storage or influence lake levels.
 - Officials indicated:
 - The system appears to be approaching equilibrium conditions.
 - Additional data and monitoring are needed to fully understand groundwater behavior.

Discussion followed regarding the council's recommendation to curtail solar developments. The commission received the recommendation and forwarded the matter to Planning and Zoning for further review and a potential public hearing.

It was clarified that Planning and Zoning will provide a recommendation back to the Commission before any final decision is made. Commissioners noted differing votes on moving the item forward but emphasized the importance of council input.

Additional discussion highlighted public feedback, including concerns about regulating private land use and mixed opinions on solar development.

8. Additional Issues from Council Members

Council members said they have heard a couple of negative comments about the solar.

9. Concerned Citizens

Bill Fasslin of the public expressed opposition to solar projects, citing concerns about long-term land impacts, effects on natural resources, and the importance of responsible land management for future generations.

10. Adjourn

Meeting was adjourned.