

Protecting the Great Salt Lake Ecosystem from Expanded Mineral Development

More than five million birds -- 250 species -- use the Great Salt Lake and its surrounding wetlands every year. Many of these birds use the lake to breed, including the magnificent American White Pelican and the California Gull, Utah's state bird.

The Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands has a core obligation, required by Utah law, to ensure that any use of Great Salt Lake does not interfere with navigation, fish and wildlife habitat, aquatic beauty, public recreation, and water quality on or in the lake. The law also requires that protection of these "public trust values" trumps any other use on sovereign lands. The law cannot be superseded in the name of economic development.

Unfortunately, the Division has just done exactly that. On July 2nd, the Division awarded a 10 year mineral lease of 23,088 acres (36 square miles) on the west side of the lake to Great Salt Lake Minerals. The lease will allow the company to build many miles of dikes and nearly double its production of potassium sulfate, a fertilizer. Coupled with an 8,000 acre lease already held by the company in Bear River Bay, when added to their existing operations, the footprint of development will be about the same size as Salt Lake City -- 119 square miles. That's 13 % of the total area of the lake when waters are low and about 7 % at average lake level.

Without the benefit of any actual research or analysis, the Division justified its approval by relying on one or two random site visits, one interview with a company employee, and a "no response" from the Division of Water Quality. In assessing the wildlife habitat values, the Division concluded that Gunnison Island's colonial bird populations would not be harmed. The scientific evidence? A solo photographer once visited and was able to photograph the birds. The brief visit of a lone photographer hardly compares with a large scale commercial operation covering 36 square miles. The island hosts one of the largest single breeding populations of American White Pelicans in North America and the lake holds the world's largest breeding population of California Gulls. To breed, both species require strict isolation, and yet the Division would allow Great Salt Lake Minerals to operate within two miles of this remote and theoretically protected island.

The noise of operations alone could disrupt these nesting birds while the dikes the company will build will allow easy access for predators – avoiding predators was the very reason the birds found refuge here in the first place.

Unfortunately, the rest of the Division’s decision is equally devoid of even the barest attempt at scientific analysis or thoughtful scrutiny.

Rather, the Division simply declared that “as in the past, it is expected that the bird populations will adapt accordingly as they have in past decades.” Given the increasing development pressures all around the lake and the constant fluctuations of lake level, it is unrealistic to claim that the birds will find anywhere comparable to “adapt”.

On July 23, a coalition including FRIENDS of Great Salt Lake appealed the Division’s decision. The Division completely failed to undertake the necessary public trust analysis relative to the existing leases in Bear River Bay and new lease in Gunnison Bay. It acted inconsistently with its constitutional and statutory duties relative to diking and mineral extraction of sovereign lands of Great Salt Lake.

The value of the Great Salt Lake Ecosystem to migratory and breeding bird populations in the western US and the Western Hemisphere cannot be overstated. It deserves better from the State agency sworn to protect it.

Lynn de Freitas, Executive Director FRIENDS of Great Salt Lake

The Utah Waterfowl Association
National Audubon
Utah Rivers Council
The Utah Chapter of the Sierra Club
Bridgerland Audubon Society
Red Cliffs Audubon Society
Wasatch Audubon Society
The League of Women Voters of Salt Lake
The League of Women Voters of Utah
The Nature Conservancy of Utah
The Utah Airboat Association