

End This Water War

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Battles over water rights have shaped the American West and its development, determining where growth would survive and where it would stagnate. One of Utah's longest-running water battles, however, is a bafflement because both sides seemingly have settled it, more than once.

The Gooseberry Narrows Reservoir ought to have been built in Sanpete County decades ago. However, Carbon County, which currently receives the water that would be diverted to this reservoir, continues to fight its construction despite an agreement signed in 1984. Carbon's Water Conservancy District has been joined by sportsmen groups in protesting construction once more, which has delayed it again. In January, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation gave a final approval to building the reservoir, which is estimated to cost \$32 million. Nothing in this battle, however, seems to be truly final.

We understand the concerns Carbon may have over whether the reservoir will leave it enough water, although the new reservoir would receive only 5,400 acre feet per year. In a time of long-term drought, water concerns are natural, even if current runoff is more than sufficient for both sides. But the history of this project suggests Carbon has an obligation to live up to its previous agreements.

This dispute can be traced to the Great Depression era, when Washington gave approval for a Sanpete reservoir in conjunction with an expansion of the Scofield Reservoir in Carbon County. However, the Sanpete dam was put on hold after World War II erupted and both counties agreed that Scofield should be expanded first so as not to threaten rail and mining efforts important to the military. But Carbon officials signed an agreement saying they would support construction of the Sanpete dam after the war.

Despite this, Carbon officials later stood in the way of construction. In 1975, the Bureau of Reclamation affirmed the water rights of Sanpete County, which was followed in 1982 by a Utah Supreme Court decision reaffirming the binding nature of the agreement signed during the war. Still, the battle continued. In 1984, both sides signed yet another agreement. This time, Sanpete County agreed to receive less water if Carbon County would withdraw its objections. Still, Carbon later objected.

Earlier this year, the Carbon County Water Conservancy District, Trout Unlimited-Utah Water Project and the Stonefly Chapter of Trout Unlimited signed a letter saying the Bureau of Reclamation has inadequately analyzed the effects of a new reservoir, particularly regarding wetlands, water quality and recreation.

However, the deputy area manager for the Provo office of the Bureau of Reclamation has said he is proud of the work he and his staff have done since the mid-1990s, studying the effects and listening to concerns.

Now it is spring once more — the one time of year when farmers in Sanpete County tend to have enough water from the melting snows. But they know it won't last. Soon the hot, dry months will come, parching the land. On a good year, they say, they might get two crops.

Farming isn't the only consideration. Nearby Utah County is growing rapidly, and a natural pattern for that growth would lead it into Sanpete County, but not without adequate water.

Given the record of signed agreements, court decisions and Bureau of Reclamation approvals, it's time to finally let Sanpete County have its Gooseberry Narrows Reservoir. Eight decades is long enough for any water war.