EarthBeat
Faith

Olof Wood walks across reef-like structures called microbialites, exposed by receding waters at the Great Salt Lake, Tuesday, Sept. 6, 2022, near Salt Lake City. Amid rising panic about the future of Utah's Great Salt Lake, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is putting newfound emphasis on environmental stewardship. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

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Donating a small reservoir's worth of water rights to Utah's Great Salt Lake. Replacing grass with rocks and water-wise landscaping around neatly manicured churches. Reducing water use by more than one-third outside the headquarters in Salt Lake City's Temple Square. These are among the actions that the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is taking to address the realities of a rapidly approaching, drier future.

Remarks from Bishop Christopher Waddell at the University of Utah on Friday underscored how the church — one of the biggest land and water rights holders in the western United States — is expanding its role in conservation and looking for solutions "that protect the future for all God's children."

"Our ability to be wise stewards of the earth is dependent on our understanding of the natural resources we have been blessed with," the high-ranking church official said at a symposium on the future of the Great Salt Lake at the University of Utah's S.J. Quinney College of Law.

Speaking after a long list of scientists and Republican Gov. Spencer Cox, Waddell said the church's focus on stewardship spanned back to the Brigham Young era, noting that the faith's forefather endorsed what one historian said was a "radical notion" — that water is a public resource, not just a matter of private property rights.

He said that the church was grateful for the wet winter — but unsurprised given the power of prayer — and urged members of the faith to conserve water and to not let the season's plentiful snowpack go to waste.

The church's expanded role in Utah's conservation efforts comes as an increasing number of large institutions acknowledge additional actions will likely be needed to prepare for challenges ahead in the drought-stricken western United States. Yet it is also reigniting recurring questions from a growing chorus of environmentalists and scientists about whether the region's leaders — in business, politics and religion — are acting aggressively enough to confront drought and its looming consequences.

An acre-foot is enough water to supply about two to three U.S. households for a year and the lake operates at a 1.2 million acre-foot deficit.

Church officials announced earlier this week that they planned to donate roughly 20,000 acre-feet of water rights to the Great Salt Lake, which has shrunk to its lowest levels ever due to a supply-demand imbalance caused by decadeslong regional drought. The church has at least 75,000 acre-feet of active water rights, the Salt Lake Tribune reported in February.

The church's donation is roughly the size of a small reservoir and about 2% of what's needed to keep the lake at its current level, according to research from a group of scientists led by Brigham Young University Ecologist Ben Abbott.

"It's a drop in the bucket on one level, but it's also a big drop," Abbott said of the church's donation.

State of Utah Department of Natural Resources park ranger Angelic Lemmon walks across reef-like structures called microbialites, exposed by receding waters at the Great Salt Lake on Wednesday, Sept. 28, 2022, near Salt Lake City. A high-ranking official of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints spoke to scientists and politicians at the University of Utah on Friday, March 17, 2023, about the church's recent move to donate 20,000 acre-feet of water to help maintain the elevation of

the Great Salt Lake and commitment to re-landscaping its temples and meetinghouses known for their neatly manicured grass. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

Though there is less water now flowing through the rivers that have historically fed the lake, growing cities and farms continue to draw water, causing the lake's elevation to plummet. If the lake continues to shrink, it could risk being an ecological, economic and public health disaster; as more toxic dust is exposed on the shoreline, it will likely endanger native species, dirty the air in surrounding communities and reduce the "lake effect" snow that the state's ski industry relies on.

Scientists worry that if the lake's current trajectory continues, the surrounding areas could become desolate wastelands like the areas surrounding parts of inland California's Salton Sea and the Owens Valley.

Utah lawmakers have passed a variety of drought-related measures to make farming more efficient and to pay homeowners for replacing some grass. Yet they haven't advanced more drastic proposals on par with neighboring states, amid winter snowfall expected to temporarily stave off crises at both Lake Powell on the Utah-Arizona border and the Great Salt Lake.

"Mother nature really helped us out," Republican Sen. Scott Sandall said earlier this month. "We didn't have to pull that lever for emergency use."

With scientists projecting that the lake could dry up in as soon as five years, demands have grown louder for lawmakers to commit to keeping the lake at a baseline elevation — and to consider more aggressive policies to ensure more water is delivered amid competing interests like municipal development and water intensive farms.

This Thursday, Aug. 21, 2014, photo shows two LDS chapels built adjacent to each other on Angel Street, in Kaysville, Utah. (Rick Egan/AP/The Salt Lake Tribune)

Though lawmakers and state leaders laud conservation efforts underway, they still plan to dam the Bear River — the largest tributary feeding the Great Salt Lake — and the Lake Powell Pipeline, which would siphon water from the shrinking reservoir that stores Colorado River water for seven U.S. states and Mexico.

"Our state leaders have failed to solve the Great Salt Lake crisis because they have turned their back on meaningful solutions to put water in the Lake," Zach Frankel, the executive director of the Utah Rivers Council, said.

On Friday, Cox was firm in rebutting the idea that political leaders aren't doing enough to save the Great Salt Lake. He cautioned scientists about the degree of certainty with which they present "doom and gloom" projections, and warned activists that the aggressive policy changes they seek could kindle fierce public backlash and jeopardize progress.

"We are going faster than I ever thought we would go. But if we start confiscating farms and water shares, you will see politicians respond very quickly. People will run for office to make sure that we are not saving the Great Salt Lake," Cox said. "They will be elected. Those are the types of things that you have to think through."