

**Testimony of Zachary Renstrom  
General Manager  
of the  
Washington County Water Conservancy District  
Before the  
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands  
Oversight Field Hearing on "Empowering Local Voices and Stopping  
Federal Overreach to Improve the Management of Utah's Public Lands."  
April 22, 2024**

Mr. Chairman Curtis, Rep. Maloy, Rep. Moore, and other distinguished members of the Committee. I am grateful to have been invited to appear before you today to discuss the remarkable water management accomplishments of this desert community. As has been mentioned, Washington County is the fastest-growing County in America. In the last decade, our population has increased 37 percent and our per capita water use has decreased significantly. We are creating a more sustainable community through aggressive water conservation measures, reuse expansion, agricultural water optimization, and intelligent growth ordinances. Washington County is dependent on one, fully appropriated water supply -- the Virgin River watershed, a tributary of the Colorado River that runs through Zion National Park. This water source has been developed and used by settlers since 1854. It now serves over 200,000 residents and an estimated 8-10 million annual tourists.

The Virgin River watershed is prone to excessive drought conditions and is insufficient to meet the demands of a population projected to more than double by 2060. We must conserve AND diversify. We have developed a 20-year plan that relies on new infrastructure, aggressive conservation, wastewater reuse, and optimization of agricultural water.

## **Conservation**

The district has worked with Washington County and our municipal partners to adopt the most restrictive water use ordinances in Utah. Washington is the first county in the state to prohibit non-functional lawn in new commercial, industrial and institutional developments; require weather-based smart irrigation controllers; and, mandate golf course water budgets. Other measures include restricting lawn in new residential development, implementing lawn replacement incentives, and improving rate structures to penalize water waste. The community has responded well to these programs.

Washington County represents 7% of Utah's population, but we account for 34% of the grass that was replaced statewide in 2023. This is partly due to a clever public awareness campaign with messages like "Get your Saturday back" and "Get off your lazy grass."

Washington County has replaced enough grass to run a 12-inch wide strip of grass from the county administration building to California's border. Additional conservation will account for about 25% of the water needed to serve our community over the next 20 years.

## **Regional Reuse System**

Construction is underway on a new regional reuse system that includes expanded treatment facilities, reservoirs, and pipelines to capture, treat and deliver treated wastewater for agricultural and irrigation purposes, freeing up potable water. Reuse will provide more than 50% of the anticipated water demand of our community over the next 20 years.

## **Local Supply Optimization**

In addition to developing new storage, we are expanding well systems to maximize agricultural groundwater for future conversion to municipal development. We support efforts to improve system efficiencies, manage groundwater and meter water use.

### **20-Year Water Supply Plan Summary**

The collective efforts of conservation, reuse and local supply optimization are anticipated to provide approximately 46,600 acre feet at a cost of well over \$1 billion.

### **Red Cliffs National Conservation Area/Warner Valley Reservoir**

The Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA) is an integral part of our watershed, with snowpack from the Pine Valley Mountain feeding groundwater basins inside the Conservation Area. In addition to directing BLM to identify a route for the northern corridor roadway through the NCA, the Washington County portion of the 2009 Omnibus Public Lands Management Act guaranteed our continued access to the historic wells in the groundwater basin at the foot of the mountain and within the NCA boundary. Since 2020, the Water District and the BLM have been working to complete a land exchange to protect 90 acres of private inholdings within the Conservation Area boundary. The exchange will involve the District purchasing the inholding and exchanging it to BLM for a potential reservoir site in the Warner Valley area. The land exchange will permanently protect desert tortoise habitat and result in more efficient management of land within the NCA boundary. It will also protect our watershed. The BLM, Water District, and Washington County, as administrator of the multi-species HCP that established the Reserve, entered into a Memorandum of Understanding

(MOU) in December 2020 for this purpose and are working together to acquire the remaining privately-owned acreage through exchange and possible donation. The County is contributing funding towards the processing of the exchange, and the District has entered into an option agreement to acquire the non-Federal property acres needed for the exchange.

### **Next Steps**

Longer-term planning is underway through a grant with the Bureau of Reclamation to evaluate how we can beneficially use water from the La Verkin Hot Springs, also known as Pah Tempe. According to the Bureau of Reclamation, the hot springs are the Colorado River's second-highest source of salinity. The United States has a treaty obligation to reduce salinity in the water delivered to Mexico. As an aside, I want to thank all of you for introducing H.R. 7872 two weeks ago to extend the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Act, which authorizes the funding for the hot springs project. The hot springs are natural springs located on the Virgin River on the boundary between Hurricane and La Verkin that produce approximately 5,000 gallons per minute, or more than seven million gallons daily, of 107-degree Fahrenheit water. The springs release an astounding 109,000 tons (6,813 semi-truck loads) of salt annually. The springs' high salinity limits use and poses unique challenges to our regional and local water supply. The Water District is studying treatment options to improve the water quality for future use as a blended resource. High power costs and salt disposal pose our most significant challenges. We are also evaluating possible ways to harness solar power and monetize salt production through a myriad of potential uses.

In the interim, the Water District has agreed with a national hot springs operator to create Zion Canyon Hot Springs. The \$60 million resort will be located on elevated topography in La Verkin, offering guests picturesque views of the Virgin River canyon.

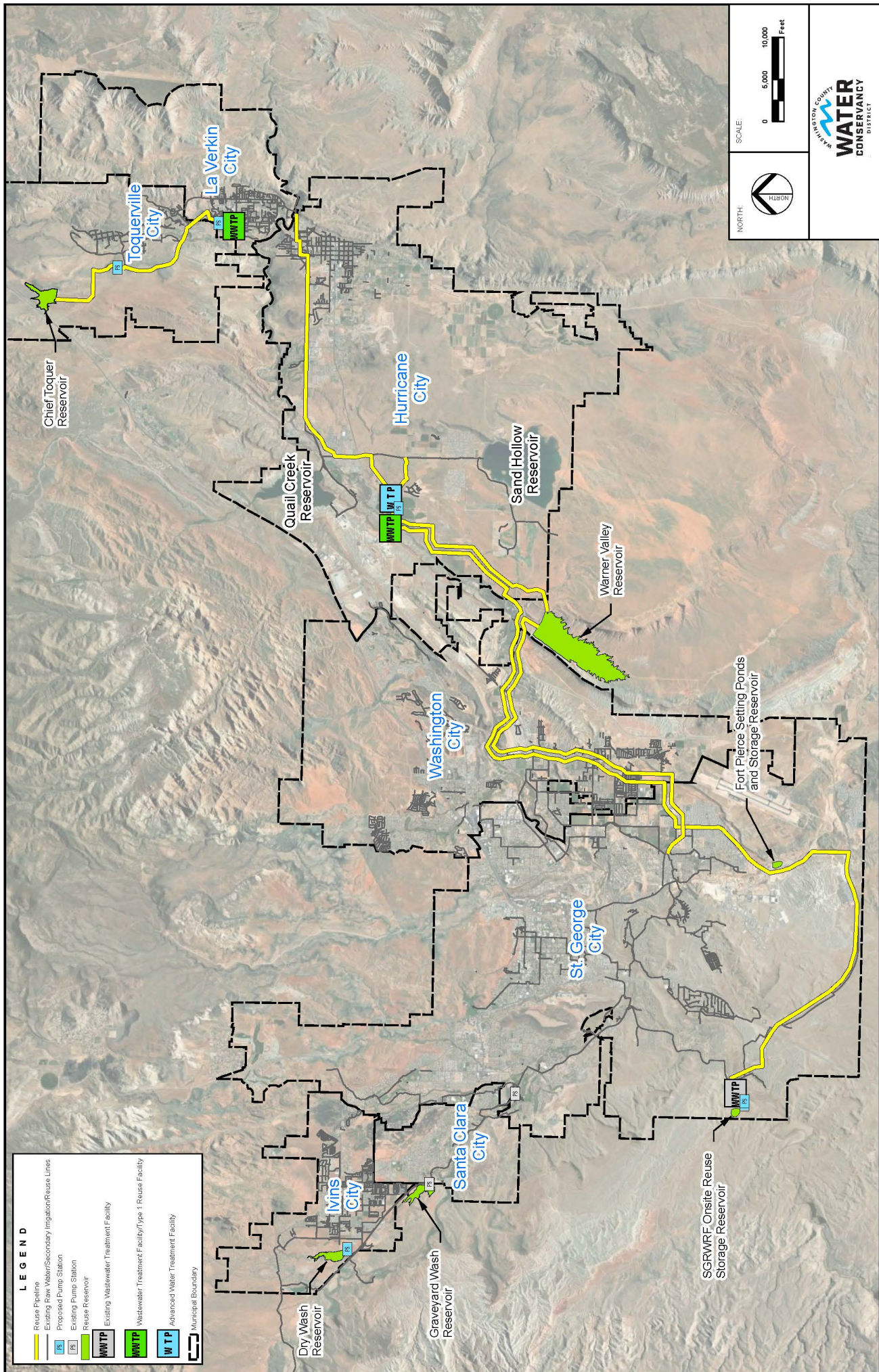
Off Road Capital Partners and the founder of Iron Mountain Hot in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, are developing Zion Canyon Hot Springs and will manage the resort as a public recreational amenity. The District has entered into a long-term lease agreement with the developers for land and a portion of the water produced by the hot springs. The developer broke ground in March and is scheduled to open in the fall of 2025. The 15-acre resort will feature 53 pools, including a large freshwater pool and whirlpool. Water from the springs will be used in the pools and returned to the Virgin River.

## **Conclusion**

The Washington County Water Conservancy District is determined and committed to prepare for the future in this beautiful area. We have significant challenges with water resources, topography and endangered species. The public land nexus requires us to obtain federal permits on many of the District's projects. These permits are unnecessary costly and time consuming both for the Federal Government and local governments. permits. Washington County's history is one of coming together to solve complicated issues. We love this community and are honored to call it home.

Thank you for your time.





**LEGEND**

- Reuse Pipeline
- Existing Raw Water/Secondary Irrigation/Reuse Lines
- RS Proposed Pump Station
- R Existing Pump Station
- R Reuse Reservoir
- WWTP Existing Wastewater Treatment Facility
- WWTP Wastewater Treatment Facility/Type 1 Reuse Facility
- WTP Advanced Water Treatment Facility
- Municipal Boundary

