

Utah

Spring 2026

The Nature
Conservancy



Gift and Estate Planning

Create Your Conservation Legacy

What does tomorrow hold for the world we love? We are grateful for the thousands of forward-thinking individuals who have made a gift for the future by including The Nature Conservancy in their estate plans. Each year, more than 20 percent of the total funds raised come from gifts like these. They truly make a difference for our world. You can make a lasting impact for nature by including The Nature Conservancy as a beneficiary in your will or estate plan.

To create your own legacy for nature, contact Eden Bennett at 801.531.0999, email eden.bennett@tnc.org, or visit nature.org/legacy.

On the Cover: At TNC's Scott and Norma Matheson Wetlands Preserve, a pond reflects the canyon walls rising on either side of the Colorado River near Moab. © Alec Lyons



ONE VISION

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) envisions a future with a livable climate, healthy communities, and thriving nature.

TWO CRISES

To make this vision a reality, our work is focused on addressing the two interconnected crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.

THREE PRIORITIES

We address those crises through three global priorities:

- Protecting ocean, land and fresh water
- Providing food and water
- Tackling climate change

Dear friends,

Utah's landscapes are in many ways defined by contrasts—mountains and deserts, wetlands and sagebrush, abundance and scarcity. Conserving the lands and waters that sustain these living landscapes requires both urgency and patience, and it depends on people who care deeply about the future of nature in our state and across our planet. The Nature Conservancy's work is likewise urgent but also requires the patience to build trust and close collaborations over time to ensure we include different perspectives and thoughtful innovation in our strategies and projects.

Across Utah—and around the globe—The Nature Conservancy works toward one shared vision: a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature. To move toward that vision, we focus our efforts on two interconnected crises—climate change and biodiversity loss—by protecting lands and waters, supporting sustainable food and water systems and tackling climate change. In Utah, this work is grounded in partnerships with public agencies, other non-profits, Tribal nations, ranchers and farmers, businesses, universities, and supporters like you.

In this newsletter, we share recent developments at the Utah Legislature that impact TNC's work and conservation across our state, particularly as it relates to water scarcity. In the sagebrush rangelands of northwestern Utah, ranching families are working with us to conserve important sage-grouse habitat while keeping their lands healthy and productive for generations to come. Along West Coyote Creek near Moab, TNC and partners are restoring a small but vital stream using simple, nature-based techniques that help water remain on the landscape longer—benefiting wildlife, people and the surrounding desert ecosystem.

You'll also learn about exciting developments in the NATURE (Native American Tribes Upholding Restoration and Education) program, which we have co-created with Tribal members to support the next generation of Indigenous conservation leaders. At the Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve, we are investing in improvements to ensure the preserve continues to educate and inspire visitors young and old while protecting critical bird habitat along the shores of the lake for years to come.

What connects these stories is the dedication and hard work of the people who make conservation possible—our staff, partners, volunteers and supporters, who share a deep commitment to Utah's extraordinary living landscapes. Their dedication gives me hope each day as we diligently strive to achieve our vision of thriving human and natural communities.

Your support makes this work possible. Because of you, The Nature Conservancy is able to achieve conservation successes like those shared with you in this newsletter and replicate those successes across Utah and beyond—protecting critical ecosystems, restoring rivers and wetlands, getting more water to Great Salt Lake, and building long-lasting partnerships. That's how we strengthen both nature and communities across Utah.

Thank you for being part of this effort and sharing our vision.

With gratitude,



Elizabeth Kitchens

Elizabeth Kitchens

Utah State Director





2026 State Legislature Continues Momentum on Great Salt Lake and Energy

The 2026 General Session of the Utah State Legislature concluded in early March. Before the final gavel struck, 1,016 bills were introduced, 542 bills were passed, and the state's \$31.6 billion budget was set for the coming year. After last year's self-imposed "pause" on major water legislation, the legislature passed more than 20 water-related bills this session. Pushing forward on the state's Operation Gigawatt, Utah's evolving energy future was also a major priority for legislators on the Hill.

Progress was made to get more water into Great Salt Lake. Many bills and funding sources passed that strengthen and build upon years of consistent movement forward. The Office of the Great Salt Lake Commissioner will establish an agricultural water leasing program with \$2.75 million in annual funding to increase flows to the Lake (*HB410*). Additionally, a new type of water right application will facilitate faster water transactions for the new leasing program as well as the Great Salt Lake Watershed Enhancement Trust (*HB348*). Water providers will be

allowed to dedicate excess water to Great Salt Lake in their conservation plans (*HB296*). Finally, the legislature funded the purchase of the U.S. Magnesium land and its associated water rights of approximately 144,000 acre-feet for \$30 million (*HB3*).

Significant funding will be coming toward Great Salt Lake restoration efforts. A settlement over a long-lasting dispute over ownership of the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge was approved that will transfer 22,311 acres of land within the Refuge to the federal government in exchange for an estimated \$60 million that the state will put toward lake restoration (*HJR30*). Revenue from brine shrimp royalty taxes will now be dedicated to leasing water to go to the lake or toward projects that benefit the health of the lake (*HB247*). Hoping for considerable federal funding after President Trump's social media post on the importance of saving Great Salt Lake, the legislature urged the President, Congress and federal agencies to provide funding and support for lake restoration as soon as possible (*HCR9*).



Great Salt Lake © Jim Breitingner

Unfortunately, not many water conservation bills passed this year, but a few made it across the finish line. State government facilities will now be required to use waterwise landscaping, limit non-functional turf and restrict overhead watering practices (*SB46*). New, large data centers must report on water usage during construction and ongoing operations and any measures to reduce water consumption (*HB76*).

Legislators took another step to pave the way for nuclear to become a part of Utah's energy future. The legislature established the Nuclear Energy Regulatory Office within the Department of Environmental Quality (*HB78*) and supported Utah having nuclear manufacturing, generation and processing capabilities (*HCR1, SCR1*).

The demand for critical minerals to support everything from technology to renewable energy is a national priority. In Utah, the importance of critical mineral development and manufacturing was solidified this year with the creation of the Critical Mineral Council, establishing the Minerals for Industrial, National, and Economic Security (MINES) Center, setting a goal for Utah to develop 25 percent of critical mineral demand and process 50 percent of U.S. critical minerals, and large funding to implement (*SB254*).

Several bills this session addressed the negative impacts on wildlife from human conflicts. As part of the approval process for renewable energy projects, it will be required to consult with the Division of Wildlife Resources (*HB412*). Goshen Bay Waterfowl Management Area was established at the southern end of Utah Lake to facilitate habitat restoration and prohibit development in this critical wildlife habitat (*HB93*). A new fund was established to go toward wildlife safety crossings that have proved extremely successful in decreasing collisions between wildlife and vehicles (*HB491*). The Jordan River, a 50-mile riparian corridor and urban wildlife habitat that connects Utah Lake and Great Salt Lake, will be improved with \$2 million in funding toward restoration projects (*SB130*).

Overall, progress was made on many fronts, including Great Salt Lake, in the brief 45 days of the session. We are grateful for the hard work and collaboration with legislators, state partners, the agricultural community, industry and a broad array of stakeholders, and will continue to work with them to implement these bills, as well as develop new policies and funding sources favorable to conservation for 2027.



Breathing New Life Into a Drying Desert Stream

In the arid West, water is such a precious commodity that, in many places, demand is outstripping supply. With hotter, drier summers, changing snowpack and earlier spring snowmelt, it's even more critical that we keep all our waterways healthy and functioning as well as possible. But, here in Utah—the third-driest state in the country—the work is cut out for us.

As western settlement spread, many streams and rivers were altered through rechanneling and uses that degraded their banks and native vegetation. Combined with today's prolonged drought and rising water use, in some places, streams run dry during hot summer months. Thankfully, there's a growing movement to mitigate these impacts using fairly inexpensive, low-technology solutions—and The Nature Conservancy in Utah is helping lead the way.

In 2023, TNC and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) launched a five-year cooperative agreement to make stream restoration more widespread and accessible across seven western states. The agreement includes implementing restoration on at least 150 miles of streams using a technique called process-based restoration. "It's a mouthful," says Alix Pfennigwerth, who joined TNC in 2023 to manage these efforts in Utah. "But the approach is relatively simple. By adding natural materials like wood or rock back into degraded streams, we can help jumpstart the processes that make streams healthy and resilient. These structures mimic beaver dams or natural wood jams, slowing fast water, recharging groundwater, keeping meadows greener for longer, and making water available to people and wildlife later in the season."

The first Utah project under the new agreement began last fall on West Coyote Creek, a small, spring-fed, intermittent-perennial creek about 20 miles south of Moab. Though modest in size, the creek has been facing major challenges. For years, its banks were eroding due to historic grazing practices, and native willows had been muscled out by water-hogging tamarisk. If beavers had ever inhabited the creek, they were long gone. Erosion had so deepened the channel that the water rushed through rather than meandering and replenishing the meadows and groundwater. And in 2025, for the first time anyone can recall, a section of the creek ran completely dry.

"But it wasn't so far gone that we had given up hope!" offers Pfennigwerth. "It was a perfect spot for process-based restoration."

Before TNC's involvement, the BLM had begun some work by removing dense tamarisk stands to "open up" the creek, allowing more space for native willows, sedges and cottonwoods, and for the stream to meander and spread. Because the stream is in a relatively remote location, the risk of flooding or impacting nearby roads, bridges, structures or culverts was low. In short, the project was "shovel ready."

Last fall, TNC, BLM and Utah Conservation Corps crews installed more than 100 restoration structures that mimic beaver dams and log jams along 1.7 miles of stream. We are thrilled to report that those structures appear to be doing their job. They're helping spread water out across the banks, allowing the surrounding land to

soak it in like a sponge. By holding more water in the stream and surrounding ground, these structures may help sustain flow during the hottest months. They should also improve streamside habitat for a number of species, from cottonwood trees, willows and wildflowers to pollinators, songbirds and mule deer.

This spring we'll be adding new structures, as well as doing any maintenance needed to those already in place. TNC and partners are also planning hands-on workshops to share these simple but effective restoration techniques.

"And this is just the beginning," says Pfennigwerth. In the years ahead, TNC, BLM and partners will expand this work across Utah and the West. "West Coyote Creek is just one place showing us how low-tech solutions can make a difference for sustainable, healthy water in landscapes that need it most."





Conserving Working Lands in Utah's Sagebrush Sea

Sagebrush Sea is one of the most iconic landscapes in the West. Spanning 13 states, it has starred in countless western movies. Yet it remains one of the most underappreciated and threatened landscapes in the country. Its arid, shrubby landscape belies the fact that it is full of life. Besides greater sage-grouse, more than 350 species find a home in the Sagebrush Sea—many threatened, rare or endangered. The trilling song of Brewer's sparrows floats on the wind while pygmy rabbits keep a sharp eye out for hunting predators. The Sagebrush Sea has also sustained many generations of ranching families whose livelihoods also rest on healthy and thriving sagebrush shrublands.

Protecting intact landscapes like the Sagebrush Sea is central to addressing biodiversity loss while sustaining the wildlife and working lands that support ranching across the West. There are only a handful of areas in Utah as ideal for greater sage-grouse as Box Elder County. More than a third of the county has been designated as a Biologically Significant Unit (BSU) and prioritized by both state and federal agencies due to the superb condition of its sage-grouse habitat.

Recognizing the importance of preserving this portion of the Sagebrush Sea, The Nature Conservancy has secured conservation easements on nearly 14,000 acres within the BSU—including more than 3,700 acres on two properties in 2025. Most of the land within the BSU is federally owned, so the intermingled private land is critical to maintaining high-quality, connected habitat across both private and public lands, helping sustain the ecological, cultural and economic vitality of the area.

Both properties host leks—the dancing grounds where greater sage-grouse return to shimmy, puff and strut in their elaborate effort to impress a mate. Both are also noted for their good sage-grouse brood-rearing habitat. Conservation easements are voluntary contracts in which owners agree to limit development and certain activities on the property. Conservation easements bind the current and future owners of the land. On these two easements, grazing will be allowed during periods of the year. Well-designed and managed grazing is not only compatible with sage-grouse and other sagebrush wildlife, it helps maintain healthy habitat—benefiting both ranchers and wildlife.

That's certainly how Will Kunzler sees it. His family owns and runs a ranch with one of the new easements. The land was homesteaded by his great-grandfather, and the operation continues to be a family affair with Will, his mom, dad, sister, two brothers and their wives. For them, the decision to put their land under easement just made sense.

"We're trying to keep this going family to family and like to see it free from development and used for what it was intended for, for wildlife or for livestock," explains Kunzler. "When we realized we could receive compensation and still be able to graze it and keep it intact, we really liked that."

"It's a pretty secluded area and that's what we like about it," says Will Kunzler. "It's peaceful and tranquil . . . and you've got meadows. You just have to be here to appreciate it."

We are grateful to ranching families like the Kunzlers, who recognize the beauty and value of the Sagebrush Sea and are willing to be part of its preservation. We are also grateful to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, whose support—through funds from the National Mitigation and Conservation Account—made these easements possible.

Preparing the Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve for Its Next Chapter

Our Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve is among the most visited of all in The Nature Conservancy's system. Some 60,000 people tread its boardwalks, climb to the observation deck and tour the visitor pavilion. It's a critical stopover for millions of migrating birds as they journey between the Arctic and Central and South America, and a haven to the people who thrill to the sight of them. Thousands of children have made lifelong memories through the preserve-based Wings and Waters program.

But, after 20 years of such popularity, the preserve is starting to show its age. So, we're planning to do some facelifting and a little structural underpinning to ensure our guests continue to enjoy a safe and inspiring experience. You may have already seen some of the improvements, including the addition of solar energy panels, newly painted bathrooms and upgraded lighting.

The next step will be more extensive work. We'll be replacing the boardwalk decking and upgrading the pavilion and observation tower. The upside will be a preserve ready to enchant thousands of visitors. The downside is that we will have to close the preserve for about 90 days and postpone some of our most popular programs. We're still in the planning phase, and work isn't expected to begin until this fall. So, there's still time to enjoy the preserve.

Ski for Nature 2026 Watershed: From Mountain Forests to Great Salt Lake

The annual *Ski for Nature* event is a long Utah Chapter tradition of bringing conservation conversations to the mountains. For the past five years, The Nature Conservancy and Snowbird have partnered to host the event at the Cliff Lodge late in the ski season, welcoming donors, partners, community members and anyone interested in conservation—whether or not they spend the day on the slopes.

This year's theme, "Watershed: From Mountain Forests to Great Salt Lake," explored how mountain snowpack, forest health and water movement are connected to the future of Great Salt Lake. TNC's Carli Kierstead opened with a fascinating presentation showing how forest structure influences snow accumulation and melt, giving the audience a deeper understanding of how mountain forests ultimately affect water reaching the lake.

Tim Hawkes, former Utah legislator and chair of the Great Salt Lake Brine Shrimp Cooperative board, followed with an engaging presentation focused on the lake. Drawing on both his policy background and current work connected to the brine shrimp industry, he offered a message of hope: While getting more water to the lake will take sustained effort, the challenge is solvable and Utah is making meaningful progress. The program concluded with a panel discussion moderated by TNC's Danna Baxley, joined by Lindsie Smith of the Great Salt Lake Alliance, helping connect science, policy and the many issues related to Great Salt Lake.

What's New With NATURE

The NATURE (Native American Tribes Upholding Restoration and Education) program at the Canyonlands Research Center at Dugout Ranch has some exciting news. For the first time, we are adding a second phase for participants who have completed the program's first year. Created to help rebuild connections disrupted by colonization and loss, the first year of the eight-week paid internship supports young Indigenous college students while cultivating a new generation of conservation leaders. This new second phase focuses on job placement—helping participants put to use the skills they learned in the first year to find employment in their desired field. We'll be reaching out to Tribal, private and government agencies to help these talented youth move into meaningful work.

Just as exciting as adding a new year to the program, we've now brought on a new program coordinator. Davina Smith-Ijjesa is a Navajo woman who is not only a talented curriculum developer, she has deep ties to the Tribal and local communities, as well as conservation partners. Among her accomplishments, she serves as Co-Chair of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition. She is also on the Boards of Directors of the Grand Staircase Escalante Partners and Bears Ears Partnership. With her passionate commitment to protecting the Earth and rich community networks, we couldn't have asked for a better fit to guide NATURE into the future.

© Noah Wetzel/Snowbird



Partners in Conservation

The Nature Conservancy's conservation successes depend on the generosity of people who care deeply about the lands and waters that sustain us. Across Utah and around the world, TNC is working toward a future with a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature. We're pleased to introduce five members of our Legacy Club who have made a life-income gift or named TNC in their will or as a beneficiary of their life insurance plan. We are deeply grateful to those who have chosen to make TNC part of their legacy, helping create a lasting foundation for conservation.

Rachel and Pete Taylor

Pete and Rachel Taylor were both born and raised in Utah and have spent most of their lives enjoying its extraordinary natural diversity, from mountain to desert to wetland. They've also seen the tremendous amount of growth and development that are reshaping many of those places.

They understand that progress brings benefits, but it also comes with costs. They believe we have a responsibility to help preserve the clean air, water and gorgeous landscapes that sustain both wildlife and people. The Taylors care deeply about leaving a future in which future generations can experience the same sense of wonder they have.

"Every time I step outside feels like a field trip," says Rachel. "I watch seasonal changes, check my pollinator garden for bumblebees sleeping beneath blooms, and listen for new birdsongs. Nature is right outside our doors, waiting to be noticed and cared for."

Pete adds, "Time spent hiking in Utah's mountains and deserts, and observing migratory birds, has shaped our lives. Seeing wildlife thrive in healthy ecosystems reinforces how interconnected everything is and reminds us that conservation supports us all."



In particular, they support the 30x30 goal to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030. They say it is a science-based approach that helps safeguard biodiversity, strengthen resilience and preserve critical habitat for the future.

The Taylors chose The Nature Conservancy because of its science-driven, collaborative approach. They appreciate that TNC works with communities, landowners, and public agencies to create practical, lasting conservation solutions with measurable impact.

George Handley

Inspired by his religious beliefs and life experiences, George believes we have a moral duty to care for creation, and that many of the most formative and sacred experiences he has had in his life came while in contact with the natural world.

"My earliest memory is walking along the Provo River with my grandpa at age 3 or 4. Even though we moved from Utah when I was 7, we returned often to visit, and we always went to the cabin to fish. It was my first love."

With the family's move to Connecticut, George found himself growing up in the woods and by the creeks near Long Island



Sound. He says hiking the Skyline Trail at a TNC ranch in Teton Valley changed his life.

“These and many other experiences taught me to love and care for the Earth,” says George.

He would love to see more conservation in areas closer to high-density populations—those that are most vulnerable and can have the greatest impact for future generations. An example of this is TNC’s conservation easements near his home in Provo.

He believes TNC’s work can change the culture and lock in a bipartisan and cross-cultural commitment to protect our watersheds, conserve land and improve air quality so that future generations can enjoy what we have enjoyed. “This should be what Utah is known for, above all else. My own grandchildren are my future, so I am motivated by my love for them.”

He chose TNC because of its long and successful track record in Utah of nonpartisan partnerships that have preserved land in vulnerable places and its efforts to build a faith-based approach to conservation.

“TNC has helped to make conservation a fundamental commitment that transcends party.”

Maggie Snyder and Kristen Ries

Kristen Ries and Maggie Snyder moved to the West in the early 1980s in search of employment and found mountains, deserts, lakes, horizons, dark skies and wildlife. Camping, hiking, birding and exploring led them to see the beauty



beyond the city. They fell in love with the land. “We love the freedom of the wild and natural Mother Earth.”

Over the years, they have watched as the land was developed and the wild places became smaller. They find themselves having to travel longer

distances to reach some of their favorite places, and sometimes that distance makes nature harder to access. As they grow older, they drive past old familiar places—once open pastures and agricultural lands inhabited by free-range critters. Now they say they encounter high-rise housing and the other trappings of “progress.” They wonder whether future generations living in the cities will ever know the pristine wild places they’ve had the privilege of exploring.

Both are grateful to those who battled to conserve the land before their arrival in the West—work that has allowed them to enjoy the natural areas. “It is conservation that helps to keep habitats alive and wild as we have known them. It is conservation that keeps the land so that others may experience it, and it is conservation that keeps the land beyond our lifetime,” they tell us.

Ries and Snyder are proud to be among many Utahns who wish to save the land by supporting The Nature Conservancy. They say, “Save these precious ecosystems for people who wish to find them, and for the flora and fauna who call it home.”


Upper left: Rachel and Pete Taylor, Taylor family photo; Left: George Handley © Brad Slade; Above: Maggie Snyder and Kristen Ries © Jenny MacKenzie; Below: Deadhorse Point © Tom Till





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White bear poppies at TNC's White Dome Nature Preserve in St. George, Utah © Dylan Thomas