

## **Lack of available water rights won't hinder oil-shale projects**

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The virtual non-existence of available water rights in the bone-dry southern reaches of Utah will not hobble possible oil shale mining and nuclear power development projects, according to testimony delivered by industry insiders and state officials to a legislative interim committee Wednesday.

Utah state engineer Kent Jones told the committee that the state's allocation of water rights in the Uintah Basin is essentially maxed out, and either effort would require obtaining water rights in control of someone else.

"Any use of water in the Colorado River Basin will have to be done based on existing rights," Jones said.

Utah Division of Water Resources director Dennis Strong said that issue would not place a constraint on potential large-volume water uses, like oil shale processing or nuclear power generation, since they could obtain the rights from current holders in the agriculture business.

"We make those choices all the time," Strong said. "We've made them on the Wasatch Front a lot. Instead of growing crops ... we grow houses."

But University of Utah student Tim DeChristopher, awaiting trial for disrupting a Bureau of Land Management oil and gas lease auction last winter, countered in his testimony that the fight over existing rights will wreak havoc on rural communities and small agri-business owners who will be outgunned by deep-pocketed energy developers.

The shift in water control from agriculture to industry is a move, DeChristopher said, that would abandon the interests of rural communities.

"What we're looking at doing is sacrificing our local agriculture here in Utah," DeChristopher said. "I would challenge anyone on this committee to make that statement ... that Utah should be taking away water rights from our farmers and giving them to oil companies."

Dr. Laura Nelson, an energy development company officer and chair of the Utah Mining Association, told the committee that new advances in the process of extracting "synthetic crude oil" from oil shale—previously a ratio of about 5-6 barrels of water for every barrel of oil—was now about 1½ barrels of water per barrel of oil.

"Compared to ... clothing and soda pop, oil shale and oil sands recovery doesn't use that much water," Nelson said.

She then outlined the water requirements for those processes — 2.7 gallons of water for a gallon of soda pop, and 713 gallons of water for a T-shirt.

Former state legislator and current CEO of Transition Power Development LLC, Aaron Tilton also pitched the committee on the "water-wise" process of nuclear power generation. Tilton told committee members his proposed facility near Green River would only require about 55,000 acre feet of water to run a 3,000 megawatt plant, of which he's secured 53,600 acre feet already.

Testimony heard by the Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment Interim Committee Wednesday was characterized by committee co-chair Rep. Roger Barrus, R-Centerville as "factual and informational" and part of the committees focus on energy issues.

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