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Healing Utah's Watersheds

How Politics, Partnerships, and Policy Shape Restoration

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INTRODUCTION

Utah's watersheds have historically been exploited for economic uses, leading to its degradation.[1,2] Watersheds are vital for economic, ecological, recreational, and cultural purposes. A large portion of Utah's watersheds are comprised of rangelands. By the 1890s, overgrazing had quickly deteriorated much of these rangelands, and by the early 1900s, approximately 400,000 cattle and 3.8 million sheep were competing for the best remaining land. Over the next century, the federal and state governments further regulated grazing, but Utah's rangelands continued to decline due to the establishment of invasive grasses and woody plants in rangeland areas.[3] This decline presented economic, ecological, recreational, cultural, and public safety concerns that needed to be addressed by the state.

In response to such degradation, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) established the Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) in 2006 as a cross-division initiative to improve the health and resilience of Utah's rangelands and watersheds.[4] Although sometimes economic and ecological needs are pitted against each other, Utahns have strived to engineer solutions that balance the needs of all stakeholders. The WRI's success in its partnership approach for broad scale watershed restoration, its effective administrative structure, and its legislative funding have all contributed to its recognition, and continued adaptation in policy will allow for the WRI to further improve Utah's watersheds and remain a model for other states and countries.[5]

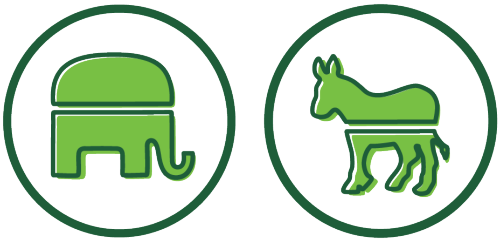
ESTABLISHMENT

In 2004, the founding members of the WRI signed the Joint Resolution created by Utah Governor Olene Walker to coordinate management of Utah's rangelands.[6,7,8] That same year, legislation appropriated $2 million to the DNR for fiscal years 2005 and 2007 to support watershed restoration work.[9] Although these events were related to the organization's inception, 2006 is considered the official start of the initiative.[10] In 2022, the WRI was codified following the passage of HB 131 with unanimous legislative support. The bill defines the purposes of the initiative to manage, restore, and improve Utah's watersheds. The bill specifies that the DNR's executive director is to appoint the WRI director, who will be responsible for running the initiative. It also established the means of the WRI's funding and requires the initiative to report yearly to the Legislature.[11] The WRI has continued to receive bipartisan support as it satisfies both the economic and ecological interests of both major political parties. Projects completed by the WRI "benefit everyone," said Sheriff Danny Perkins during the 2018 appropriations subcommittee meeting.[12] Satisfying the needs of the various stakeholders is why the WRI continues to receive strong political support by both the Utah Legislature and the broader public it serves.

Although the WRI has received little political opposition, critics oppose some of their restoration methods, such as chaining and mulching.[13,14] The WRI has responded to these critics, which shows they are listening to concerns and are striving to be transparent with the public.[15]

Benefits Economic and Ecological Stakeholders

Bipartisan Support for the WRI

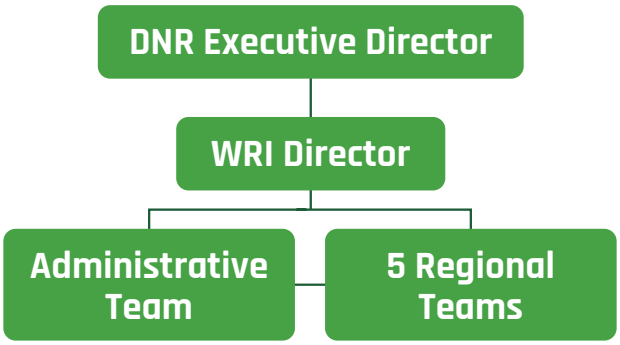


Bill HB 131
Unanimously supported

ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

The WRI is state supported and regionally run. State leadership consists of an administrative team that is responsible for securing funding and managing its operational systems. One of the key operational systems is the database, which provides information on every project including funding, agencies involved, completion status, before and after photos, and a description of each project's goals. Projects are also georeferenced, and the mapping features and related project data are publicly available for download. The administrative team also analyzes and improves regional processes and provides the criteria for regional teams to evaluate project proposals. The WRI has five regional teams that are composed of various federal, state, and private partners. Each regional team elects officers, drafts their team charters, and develops, ranks, and implements restoration projects. Regional teams have significant autonomy which allows team interests to be adapted to the unique needs of their region. Anyone can participate in this program by contributing to existing restoration projects or by proposing their own projects.[16,17]

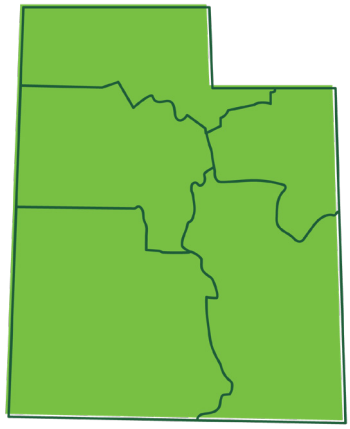
Administrative Structure of WRI



NETWORK OF PARTNERS

The partnerships that preceded the WRI's creation have played a vital role in its development, providing a strong foundation for its collaborative efforts. Critical partnerships began forming back in the 1990s with a group known now as the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD). The group coordinated efforts to address a range of environmental issues in Utah. The UPCD grew to include numerous state, federal, and private organizations. The WRI's founding partners are all members of the UPCD.[18,19,20]

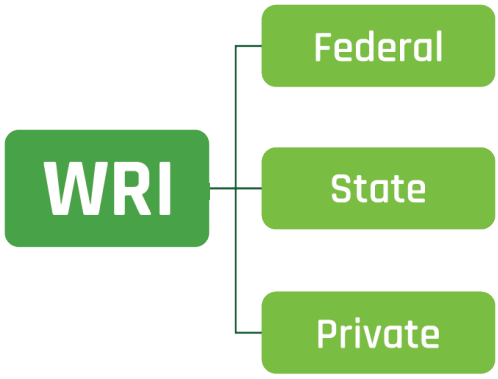
Utah 5 Regional Teams Map



The WRI is a partnership-based initiative and has accumulated more than 700 federal, state, and private partners.[21] Partnerships ranging from the Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service to private landowners enable work to continue across jurisdictional boundaries, rather than stopping at property lines. By collaborating on projects, partners have access to a larger sum of resources and information which allows watershed restoration projects to be approached on a broad scale. Partners who participate in this initiative can expect better project outcomes than if they had invested independently.[22] As a result, the WRI is influenced by the various political interests of its partners. To remain science driven and to avoid prioritizing any one partner or political ideal over the other, the WRI's administrative team has created the Project Prioritization Score Sheet which is used by the WRI's five regional teams to evaluate project proposals.[23] Proposals that receive a higher score are better aligned with the watershed needs as outlined in the score sheet. A higher score is given to proposals that better reflect the WRI's statewide restoration priorities and incorporate more ecological benefits. [24,25] A proposal will also receive a higher score if it makes an effort to include other partners during project planning and if a project gives consideration to expand across jurisdictional boundaries.[26]

WRI Partner Ecosystem

700+ Partners



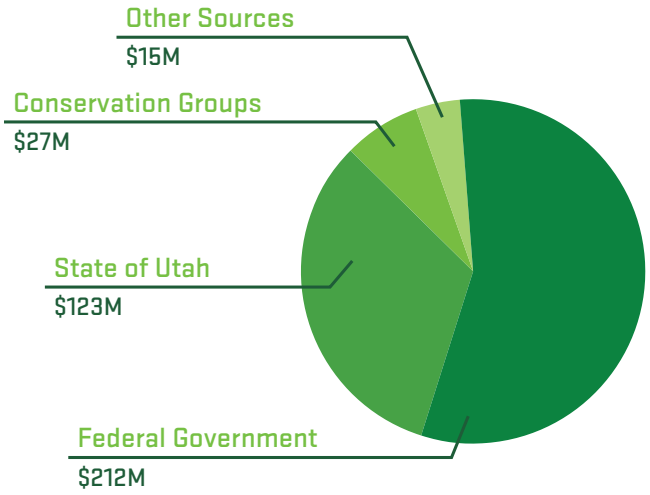
FUNDING

The WRI has three main objectives—to improve watershed health and biological diversity, to improve water quality and yield, and to promote the sustainable use of natural resources.[27] Between 2006 and 2023, the initiative completed 2,700 projects. All projects can be separated by category, starting with the most common—sagebrush restoration, high-risk fuels reduction, pinyon juniper removal, riparian [improvement of areas adjacent to a river or stream], non-native invasives [mitigation], fire rehabilitation, in stream [improvement of a river or stream's natural function], sagebrush removal, and tamarisk/olive [mitigation, as they are invasive species].[28,29] About 97% of funding received by the WRI financially supports these various projects, and the remaining 3% supports the administration.[30]

The WRI receives funding via state legislative appropriations from the general fund, dedicated credits, and sales tax. Public and private donations are held in the Watershed Restoration Expendable Special Revenue Fund until the donation can be allocated to projects approved by the donor. The WRI can also receive in-kind assistance,

meaning non-cash contributions in the form of materials, labor, equipment, etc.[31,32] From 2006 through 2023, the initiative received an aggregate of $377 million in funding to support 2,700 projects. Of the total funding, the state provided $123 million, $212 million came from the federal government, $27 million came from conservation groups, and $15 million came from other sources.[33]

Watershed Restoration Initiative Funding Sources (2006–2023)



LEGISLATIVE APPROPRIATIONS

Throughout the years, state legislation has gradually increased appropriations to the WRI, further allowing them to financially support more watershed restoration projects.[34] The following is a history of state legislative appropriations the WRI has received.

Appropriations to support the initiative began in the 2004 General Session. Legislators appropriated a one-time donation of $2 million to the DNR for the years 2005 and 2007. In 2006, due to the Sales Tax Diversion for Watershed Projects and Water Financing act, the DNR began receiving $500,000 of ongoing funding. In 2007, due to the passage of the Land and Water Reinvestment Act, the division received another $2 million of ongoing funding. This specified funding was later decreased. The division continued to grow its funding in 2013, receiving $2 million to support fire pre-suppression projects. In 2016, the NEPA fund continued the ongoing funding, granting $250,000 yearly to the initiative. Combining the years 2017 and 2018, a grand total of $3 million was allocated to the initiative as a one-time appropriation. In 2019, the initiative received several one-time appropriations—two $760,000 appropriations from the Commission for Stewardship of Public Lands Technical Correction, $2.7 million from the Fire Rehabilitation Fund, and $2 million from the Water Development Fund. The initiative also received an additional ongoing appropriation of $1.7 million from the Fire Rehabilitation Fund. Three ongoing appropriations were made to the WRI in the year 2020—another $1.7 million from the Fire Rehabilitation Fund, $2 million from the Water Development Fund, and $100,000 from Watershed Projects.[35]

NUMERICAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Within the WRI's nearly 20 years of operation, significant improvements have been made to Utah's watersheds. To quantify the initiative's impact, the WRI has reported their combined numerical achievements from 2006 through 2023. Between these years, the WRI restored 2.5 million acres of Utah's watersheds. Around 66% of this total occurred on federal land, 20% on state land, and 14% on private land. The WRI also performed stream restoration work, which totaled 2,531 miles. According to a U.S. Geological Survey, the WRI, since its inception, is estimated to have created approximately 6,560 jobs and an estimated $920 million in total economic output.[36] These notable achievements are only possible because of the WRI's many partners who work closely together on these watershed restoration projects.

WRI Accomplishments 2006–2023

2,700
Projects Completed

2.5M
Acres Restored

2,531
Miles of Stream Restored

$920M
Economic Output

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure Sustainable Funding for Collaborative Restoration

What makes the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) so effective is its ability to bring together partners across jurisdictions and agencies. The WRI has gained nationwide recognition for its effective collaborative structure and serves as a model for other states and countries.[37] But for the state to sustain this collaborative model, funding sources must be stabilized to ensure partners can maintain continuity in project implantation and in the types of projects that can be accomplished.

The majority of WRI projects are funded and implemented by federal agencies. In Fiscal Year 2026, more than 60% of approved WRI funded projects came from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) or the US Forest Service (USFS).[38] Such a level of dependence creates risk. These federal agencies are under significant budget pressure, having already faced cuts with more proposed cuts targeting areas relevant to WRI's work.[39,40,41] If federal funding is reduced, there will be immediate consequences for Utah's watersheds. Many of the crews implementing WRI projects are federally employed or contracted; thus budget reductions would lead to job losses and project delays or cancellation.[42]

Additionally, most of WRI's fire and fuels projects—an essential component in restoring watersheds—are carried out by the BLM and USFS.[43,44] Despite proactive fuels treatment providing some of the highest economic and ecological returns on land management, these projects at a large scale may not be feasible.[45] Without federal involvement, state and local organizations will be left with far fewer resources to monitor and maintain restoration efforts, leading to long-term declines in the WRI's project capacity.

The state of Utah can take proactive steps to ensure WRI's funding base by increasing its own direct investment. Doing so would not replace or reduce the importance of federal partnerships but would instead provide a safeguard against federal retrenchment. New state-level funding could come from incremental adjustments to resource-related revenue streams such as grazing permit fees, hunting and fishing license fees, or surcharges on outdoor recreation use permits. Alternatively, a portion of transportation-related revenue, such as road use fees or off-highway vehicle registration funds, could be allocated toward watershed restoration. This would ensure continuous collaboration without interruption.

Strengthen Monitoring to Support Adaptive Management

The WRI has proven itself to be a highly effective program for improving watershed health across the state. However, the WRI's monitoring could be strengthened through an adaptive management strategy, which would make the WRI more scientifically rigorous and cost effective.

The current short-term monitoring for most of its projects the WRI requires specifies what monitoring will be done.[46] In practice, this is usually limited monitoring done within one to two years of completion. Monitoring strategies differ depending on the project but often include before and after photos, site visits, vegetation transects, and checks on seeding success. The WRI also receives long-term monitoring data from the UDWR Range Trend. While Range Trend provides decades worth of helpful data, it is primarily focused on wildlife and grazing, limiting its geographic and ecological scope.[47] Range Trend is insufficient for measuring the WRI's long-term success because it is not set up to measure the goals of the WRI, namely watershed health and biological diversity, water quality and yield, and opportunities for sustainable uses of natural resources. Range Trend does not capture riparian systems, aquatic habitat, pollinators, invasive species, fire metrics, etc. Therefore, the WRI is able to track if its treatments happened, but not always the ecological consequences.[48,49]

The WRI should implement rigorous, long-term monitoring to identify which methods are effective. Once known, the less effective methods could be discontinued, thereby providing cost saving. The WRI could implement adaptive management which relies on feedback loops through long-term data, thus aligning the WRI with the best scientific practices. To achieve this, all WRI-funded projects should include a standardized long-term monitoring plan that focuses on the WRI's unique goals and values. This would include protocol beyond Range Trend, such as monitoring soil health, water quality, riparian vegetation, and fire regime recovery. A percentage of funding could be dedicated specifically to long-term monitoring. The WRI has demonstrated its effectiveness as a collaborative restoration model. By implementing better long-term monitoring, the program would improve its adaptive capacity and safeguard its funding, ensuring that all funding is put to use most effectively to achieve measurable, lasting ecological outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, the WRI has improved the stability and resilience of Utah's watersheds, enhancing their economic, ecological, recreational, and cultural value. This success is made possible by the WRI's more than 700 federal, state, and private partners who share resources and expertise, thus enabling projects to be completed on a broader scale which results in better watershed project outcomes. The WRI also benefits from its partners who have made significant financial contributions to numerous projects. Given that Utah is composed of a variety of ecosystems, every watershed project presents unique challenges. The WRI has five regional teams, and each team has the autonomy to adapt team priorities to the

unique needs of their region, leading to better watershed management outcomes. The WRI has earned consistent bipartisan support, as evidenced by increases in legislative appropriations. This unification is a result of the WRI's ability to satisfy both the economic and ecological interests of all parties. To maintain this broad support, the WRI stays politically relevant and scientifically driven by prioritizing proposals—regardless of their origin—that best align with the watershed needs as outlined in the Project Proposal Score sheet. The WRI also continues to be supported by the public that it serves and strives to be transparent with existing critics. Because of the WRI's success, they continue to be recommended as a model for other states and countries. As the WRI continues to provide favorable watershed management outcomes, Utah policymakers should continue to support the WRI's stewardship over Utah's watersheds.

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