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**Water Amendments**

2026 GENERAL SESSION

STATE OF UTAH

**Chief Sponsor: Colin W. Jack**

Senate Sponsor:

2

**LONG TITLE**

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**General Description:**

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This bill addresses water in the lower basin as defined by the Colorado River Compact.

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**Highlighted Provisions:**

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This bill:

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- ▶ exempts from provisions related to abandonment or forfeiture for nonuse certain water rights of a water conservancy district that are related to the lower basin;
- ▶ prohibits certain instream flow change applications related to the lower basin; and
- ▶ makes technical and conforming amendments.

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**Money Appropriated in this Bill:**

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None

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**Other Special Clauses:**

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None

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**Utah Code Sections Affected:**

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**AMENDS:**

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**73-1-4 (Effective 05/06/26) (Partially Repealed 12/31/30)**, as last amended by Laws of Utah 2024, Chapter 233

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**73-3-30 (Effective 05/06/26)**, as last amended by Laws of Utah 2023, Chapters 34, 253

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*Be it enacted by the Legislature of the state of Utah:*

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Section 1. Section **73-1-4** is amended to read:

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**73-1-4 (Effective 05/06/26) (Partially Repealed 12/31/30). Reversion to the public by abandonment or forfeiture for nonuse within seven years -- Saved water -- Nonuse application.**

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(1) As used in this section:

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(a) "Lower basin" means the same as that term is defined in Section 73-12a-2.

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(b) "Public entity" means:

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(i) the United States;

- (ii) an agency of the United States;
- (iii) the state;
- (iv) a state agency;
- (v) a political subdivision of the state; or
- (vi) an agency of a political subdivision of the state.

[~~(b)~~] (c) "Public water supplier" means an entity that:

- (i) supplies water, directly or indirectly, to the public for municipal, domestic, or industrial use; and
- (ii) is:
  - (A) a public entity;
  - (B) a water corporation, as defined in Section 54-2-1, that is regulated by the Public Service Commission;
  - (C) a community water system:
    - (I) that:
      - (Aa) supplies water to at least 100 service connections used by year-round residents; or
      - (Bb) regularly serves at least 200 year-round residents; and
    - (II) whose voting members:
      - (Aa) own a share in the community water system;
      - (Bb) receive water from the community water system in proportion to the member's share in the community water system; and
      - (Cc) pay the rate set by the community water system based on the water the member receives; or
  - (D) a water users association:
    - (I) in which one or more public entities own at least 70% of the outstanding shares; and
    - (II) that is a local sponsor of a water project constructed by the United States Bureau of Reclamation.

[~~(e)~~] (d) "Saved water" means the same as that term is defined in Section 73-3-3.

[~~(d)~~] (e) "Shareholder" means the same as that term is defined in Section 73-3-3.5.

[~~(e)~~] (f) "Water company" means the same as that term is defined in Section 73-3-3.5.

(g) "Water conservancy district" means the same as that term is defined in Section 73-10-32.

[~~(f)~~] (h) "Water supply entity" means an entity that supplies water as a utility service or

65 for irrigation purposes and is also:

66 (i) a municipality, water conservancy district, metropolitan water district, irrigation  
67 district, or other public agency;  
68 (ii) a water company regulated by the Public Service Commission; or  
69 (iii) any other owner of a community water system.

70 (2)(a) Except as provided in Subsection (2)(b) or (e), when an appropriator or the  
71 appropriator's successor in interest abandons or ceases to beneficially use all or a  
72 portion of a water right for a period of at least seven years, the water right or the  
73 unused portion of that water right is subject to forfeiture in accordance with  
74 Subsection (2)(c).

75 (b)(i) An appropriator or the appropriator's successor in interest may file an  
76 application for nonuse with the state engineer.

77 (ii) A nonuse application may be filed on all or a portion of the water right, including  
78 water rights held by a water company.

79 (iii) After giving written notice to the water company, a shareholder may file a  
80 nonuse application with the state engineer on the water represented by the stock.

81 (iv)(A) The approval of a nonuse application excuses the requirement of  
82 beneficial use of water from the date of filing.

83 (B) The time during which an approved nonuse application is in effect does not  
84 count toward the seven-year period described in Subsection (2)(a).

85 (v) The filing or approval of a nonuse application or a series of nonuse applications  
86 under Subsection (3) does not:

87 (A) constitute beneficial use of a water right;

88 (B) protect a water right that is already subject to forfeiture under this section; or

89 (C) bar a water right owner from:

90 (I) using the water under the water right as permitted under the water right; or

91 (II) claiming the benefit of Subsection (2)(e) or any other forfeiture defense  
92 provided by law.

93 (c)(i) Except as provided in Subsection (2)(c)(ii), a water right or a portion of the  
94 water right may not be forfeited unless a judicial action to declare the right  
95 forfeited is commenced:

96 (A) within 15 years from the end of the latest period of nonuse of at least seven  
97 years; or

98 (B) within the combined time of 15 years from the end of the most recent period

99 of nonuse of at least seven years and the time the water right was subject to one  
100 or more nonuse applications.

101 (ii)(A) The state engineer, in a proposed determination of rights filed with the  
102 court and prepared in accordance with Section 73-4-11, may not assert that a  
103 water right was forfeited unless the most recent period of nonuse of seven  
104 years ends or occurs:

105 (I) during the 15 years immediately preceding the day on which the state  
106 engineer files the proposed determination of rights with the court; or  
107 (II) during the combined time immediately preceding the day on which the  
108 state engineer files the proposed determination of rights consisting of 15  
109 years and the time the water right was subject to one or more approved  
110 nonuse applications.

111 (B) After the day on which a proposed determination of rights is filed with the  
112 court a person may not assert that a water right subject to that determination  
113 was forfeited before the issuance of the proposed determination, unless the  
114 state engineer asserts forfeiture in the proposed determination, or a person, in  
115 accordance with Section 73-4-11, makes an objection to the proposed  
116 determination that asserts forfeiture.

117 (iii) A water right, found to be valid in a decree entered in an action for general  
118 determination of rights under Chapter 4, Determination of Water Rights, is subject  
119 to a claim of forfeiture based on a seven-year period of nonuse that begins after  
120 the day on which the state engineer filed the related proposed determination of  
121 rights with the court, unless the decree provides otherwise.

122 (iv) If in a judicial action a court declares a water right forfeited, on the date on which  
123 the water right is forfeited:

124 (A) the right to beneficially use the water reverts to the public; and  
125 (B) the water made available by the forfeiture:

126 (I) first, satisfies other water rights in the hydrologic system in order of priority  
127 date; and  
128 (II) second, may be appropriated as provided in this title.

129 (d) Except as provided in Subsection (2)(e), this section applies whether the unused or  
130 abandoned water or a portion of the water is:

131 (i) permitted to run to waste; or  
132 (ii) beneficially used by others without right with the knowledge of the water right

133 holder.

134 (e) This section does not apply to:

- 135 (i) the beneficial use of water according to a written, terminable lease or other  
136 agreement with the appropriator or the appropriator's successor in interest;
- 137 (ii) a water right if [its] the water right's place of use is contracted under an approved  
138 state agreement or federal conservation fallowing program;
- 139 (iii) those periods of time when a surface water or groundwater source fails to yield  
140 sufficient water to satisfy the water right;
- 141 (iv) a water right when water is unavailable because of the water right's priority date;
- 142 (v) a water right to store water in a surface reservoir, or an aquifer in accordance with  
143 Chapter 3b, Groundwater Recharge and Recovery Act, if the water is stored for  
144 present or future beneficial use;
- 145 (vi) a water right if a water user has beneficially used substantially all of the water  
146 right within a seven-year period, provided that this exemption does not apply to  
147 the adjudication of a water right in a general determination of water rights under  
148 Chapter 4, Determination of Water Rights;
- 149 (vii) except as provided by Subsection (2)(g), a water right:
  - 150 (A)(I) owned by a public water supplier;
  - 151 (II) represented by a public water supplier's ownership interest in a water  
152 company; or
  - 153 (III) to which a public water supplier owns the right of beneficial use; and
- 154 (B) conserved or held for the reasonable future water requirement of the public,  
155 which is determined according to Subsection (2)(f);
- 156 (viii) a supplemental water right during a period of time when another water right  
157 available to the appropriator or the appropriator's successor in interest provides  
158 sufficient water so as to not require beneficial use of the supplemental water right;
- 159 (ix) a period of nonuse of a water right during the time the water right is subject to an  
160 approved change application where the applicant is diligently pursuing  
161 certification;
- 162 (x) a water right to store water in a surface reservoir if:
  - 163 (A) storage is limited by a safety, regulatory, or engineering restraint that the  
164 appropriator or the appropriator's successor in interest cannot reasonably  
165 correct; and
  - 166 (B) not longer than seven years have elapsed since the limitation described in

167 Subsection (2)(e)(x)(A) is imposed;

168 (xi) a water right subject to an approved change application for use within a water  
169 bank that has been authorized but not dissolved under Chapter 31, Water Banking  
170 Act, during the period of time the state engineer authorizes the water right to be  
171 used within the water bank; [or]

172 (xii) subject to Subsection (2)(h), that portion of a water right that is quantified as  
173 saved water in a final order from the state engineer approving a change  
174 application, but not to exceed the amount subsequently verified by the state  
175 engineer in a certificate issued under Section 73-3-17[.] ; or

176 (xiii) a water right or a portion of a water right that a water conservancy district:

177 (A)(I) uses or diverts within the lower basin;

178 (II) has an approval or a certificate from the state engineer to use or divert  
179 within the lower basin; or

180 (III) plans to use or divert within the lower basin, as demonstrated by an  
181 affidavit signed by the water conservancy district's general manager; and

182 (B)(I) owns, including as a beneficial owner of a water right conveyed to the  
183 state, acting through the Board of Water Resources or Division of Water  
184 Resources, in connection with a loan agreement;

185 (II) leases; or

186 (III) is contractually entitled to use.

187 (f)(i) The reasonable future water requirement of the public is the amount of water  
188 needed in the next 40 years by:

189 (A) the persons within the public water supplier's reasonably anticipated service  
190 area based on reasonably anticipated population growth; or  
191 (B) other water use demand.

192 (ii) For purposes of Subsection (2)(f)(i), a community water system's reasonably  
193 anticipated service area:

194 (A) is the area served by the community water system's distribution facilities; and  
195 (B) expands as the community water system expands the distribution facilities in  
196 accordance with Title 19, Chapter 4, Safe Drinking Water Act.

197 (iii) The state engineer shall by rule made in accordance with Subsection 73-2-1(4)  
198 establish standards for a written plan that may be presented as evidence in  
199 conformance with this Subsection (2)(f), except that before a rule establishing  
200 standards for a written plan under this Subsection (2)(f) takes effect, in addition to

201 complying with Title 63G, Chapter 3, Utah Administrative Rulemaking Act, the  
202 state engineer shall present the rule to:

203 (A) if the Legislature is not in session, the Natural Resources, Agriculture, and  
204 Environment Interim Committee; or

205 (B) if the Legislature is in session, the House of Representatives and Senate  
206 Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment standing committees.

207 (g) For a water right acquired by a public water supplier on or after May 5, 2008,  
208 Subsection (2)(e)(vii) applies if:

209 (i) the public water supplier submits a change application under Section 73-3-3; and  
210 (ii) the state engineer approves the change application.

211 (h) Saved water does not retain the protection of Subsection (2)(e)(xii) and any period of  
212 nonuse for saved water begins to run the day on which:

213 (i) the underlying water right that serves as the basis for the saved water is declared  
214 by court decree to have been lost due to forfeiture under this section; or  
215 (ii) the title of a right to saved water segregated under Section 73-3-27 is conveyed  
216 independent of the underlying water right.

217 (3)(a) The state engineer shall furnish a nonuse application form requiring the following  
218 information:

219 (i) the name and address of the applicant;  
220 (ii) a description of the water right or a portion of the water right, including the point  
221 of diversion, place of use, and priority;  
222 (iii) the quantity of water;  
223 (iv) the period of use;  
224 (v) the extension of time applied for;  
225 (vi) a statement of the reason for the nonuse of the water; and  
226 (vii) any other information that the state engineer requires.

227 (b)(i) Upon receipt of the application, the state engineer shall publish a notice of the  
228 application once a week for two successive weeks:

229 (A) in a newspaper of general circulation in the county in which the source of the  
230 water supply is located and where the water is to be beneficially used; and  
231 (B) as required in Section 45-1-101.

232 (ii) The notice shall:

233 (A) state that an application has been made; and  
234 (B) specify where the interested party may obtain additional information relating

235 to the application.

236 (c) An interested person may file a written protest with the state engineer against the  
237 granting of the application:

238 (i) within 20 days after the notice is published, if the adjudicative proceeding is  
239 informal; and  
240 (ii) within 30 days after the notice is published, if the adjudicative proceeding is  
241 formal.

242 (d) In a proceeding to determine whether the nonuse application should be approved or  
243 rejected, the state engineer shall follow Title 63G, Chapter 4, Administrative  
244 Procedures Act.

245 (e) After further investigation, the state engineer may approve or reject the application.

246 (4)(a) The state engineer shall grant a nonuse application on all or a portion of a water  
247 right for a period of time not exceeding seven years if the applicant shows a  
248 reasonable cause for nonuse.

249 (b) A reasonable cause for nonuse includes:

250 (i) a demonstrable financial hardship or economic depression;  
251 (ii) a physical cause or change that renders use beyond the reasonable control of the  
252 water right owner so long as the water right owner acts with reasonable diligence  
253 to resume or restore the use;  
254 (iii) the initiation of water conservation or an efficiency practice, or the operation of a  
255 groundwater recharge recovery program approved by the state engineer;  
256 (iv) operation of a legal proceeding;  
257 (v) the holding of a water right or stock in a mutual water company without use by a  
258 water supply entity to meet the reasonable future requirements of the public;  
259 (vi) situations where, in the opinion of the state engineer, the nonuse would assist in  
260 implementing an existing, approved water management plan; or  
261 (vii) the loss of capacity caused by deterioration of the water supply or delivery  
262 equipment if the applicant submits, with the application, a specific plan to resume  
263 full use of the water right by replacing, restoring, or improving the equipment.

264 (5)(a) Sixty days before the expiration of a nonuse application, the state engineer shall  
265 notify the applicant by mail or by a form of electronic communication through which  
266 receipt is verifiable, of the date when the nonuse application will expire.

267 (b) An applicant may file a subsequent nonuse application in accordance with this  
268 section.

269       Section 2. Section **73-3-30** is amended to read:

270       **73-3-30 (Effective 05/06/26). Change application for an instream flow -- Change**  
271       **application for delivery to a reservoir.**

272       (1) As used in this section:

273           (a) "Colorado River System" means the same as that term is defined in Sections 73-12a-2  
274           and 73-13-10.

275           (b) "Division" means:

276              (i) the Division of Wildlife Resources created in Section 23A-2-201[;];

277              (ii) the Division of State Parks created in Section 79-4-201[;]; or

278              (iii) the Division of Forestry, Fire, and State Lands created in Section 65A-1-4.

279           (c) "Person entitled to the use of water" means the same as that term is defined in  
280           Section 73-3-3.

281           (d) "Sovereign lands" means the same as that term is defined in Section 65A-1-1.

282           (e) "Wildlife" means a species of [animals, including mammals, birds, fish, reptiles,  
283           amphibians, mollusks, and crustaceans, that are] animal, including a mammal, bird,  
284           fish, reptile, amphibian, mollusk, or crustacean, that is protected or regulated by a  
285           statute, law, regulation, ordinance, or administrative rule.

286       (2)(a) Pursuant to Section 73-3-3, a division may file a permanent change application, a  
287       fixed time change application, or a temporary change application, or a person entitled  
288       to the use of water may file a fixed time change application or a temporary change  
289       application, to provide water within the state for:

290              (i) an instream flow within a specified section of a natural or altered stream; or  
291              (ii) use on sovereign lands.

292       (b) The state engineer may not approve a change application filed under this Subsection  
293       (2) unless the proposed instream flow or use on sovereign lands will contribute to:  
294              (i) the propagation or maintenance of wildlife;  
295              (ii) the management of a state [parks] park; or  
296              (iii) the reasonable preservation or enhancement of the natural aquatic environment.

297       (c) A division may file a change application on:

298              (i) a perfected water right:  
299                  (A) presently owned by the division;  
300                  (B) purchased by the division for the purpose of providing water for an instream  
301                  flow or use on sovereign lands, through funding provided for that purpose by  
302                  legislative appropriation; or

303 (C) secured by lease, agreement, gift, exchange, or contribution; or  
304 (ii) an appurtenant water right acquired with the acquisition of real property by the  
305 division.

306 (d) A division may:

307 (i) purchase a water right for the purposes described in Subsection (2)(a) only with  
308 funds specifically appropriated by the Legislature for water rights purchases; or  
309 (ii) accept a donated water right without legislative approval.

310 (e) A division may not acquire water rights by eminent domain for an instream flow, use  
311 on sovereign lands, or for any other purpose.

312 (3)(a) A person entitled to the use of water shall obtain a division director's approval of  
313 the proposed change before filing a fixed time change application or a temporary  
314 change application with the state engineer.

315 (b) By approving a proposed fixed time change application or temporary change  
316 application, a division director attests that the water that is the subject of the  
317 application can be used consistent with the statutory mandates of the director's  
318 division.

319 (4)(a) Pursuant to Section 73-3-3, a person entitled to the use of water may file a fixed  
320 time change application or a temporary change application for a project to deliver  
321 water to a reservoir located partially or entirely within the Colorado River System in  
322 the state in accordance with:

323 (i) Colorado River Drought Contingency Plan Authorization Act, Public Law 116-14;  
324 (ii) a water conservation program funded by the Bureau of Reclamation; or  
325 (iii) a water conservation program authorized by the state.

326 (b) Before filing a change application under this Subsection (4), a person entitled to the  
327 use of water shall obtain the approval from the executive director of the Colorado  
328 River Authority of Utah, appointed under Section 63M-14-401.

329 (c) By approving a proposed fixed time change application or temporary change  
330 application, the executive director of the Colorado River Authority of Utah attests  
331 that the water that is the subject of the application can be used consistent with this  
332 section.

333 (5) In addition to the requirements of Section 73-3-3, an application authorized by this  
334 section shall include:

335 (a) a legal description of:  
336 (i) the segment of the natural or altered stream that will be the place of use for an

instream flow;

(ii) the location where the water will be used on sovereign lands; or

(iii) the reservoir located partially or entirely within the Colorado River System in the state that the water will be delivered to; and

(b) appropriate studies, reports, or other information required by the state engineer demonstrating:

- (i) the projected [benefits] benefit to the public resulting from the change; and
- (ii) the necessity for the proposed instream flow or use on sovereign lands.

(6) A person may not appropriate unappropriated water under Section 73-3-2 for the purpose of providing an instream flow or use on sovereign lands.

(7) Water used in accordance with this section is considered to be beneficially used, as required by Section 73-3-1.

(8) A physical structure or physical diversion from the stream is not required to implement a change under this section.

(9) An approved change application described in this section does not create a right of access across private property or allow any infringement of a private property right.

(10) Notwithstanding the other provisions of this section, if the diversion point under a proposed permanent, fixed time, or temporary change application is located within the lower basin, as defined in Section 73-12a-2:

(a) a person entitled to the use of water, other than a division, may not file the change application under this section; and

(b) a division may not file the change application under Subsection (4).

### Section 3. Effective Date.

This bill takes effect on May 6, 2026.