

Great Salt Lake Minerals Corporation seeks to increase its operations; environmentalists and others aren't so sure that should be approved

A line in the salt

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OGDEN — It's hard to boil down to one question the debate over industrial use of the Great Salt Lake, but David Hyams, spokesman for Great Salt Lake Minerals, did his best.

GSL harvests potassium sulfate, used to make fertilizer, and magnesium chloride, which has industrial uses, from the lake. He was discussing his company's plans to expand its existing 43,000 acres of evaporation ponds. The company is awaiting Corps of Engineers approval to add 33,000 acres, and would like to dike a further 37,000 acres in new leases it just acquired.

Environmentalists, lake advocates and bird scientists are resisting, saying that much development, a total of 117,000 acres, could destroy the lake. Hyams acknowledges their argument.

"One question we always wonder, and we look to someone like you to ask because it would be too belligerent for us, is, where on the scale of zero to 70,000 acres (the total proposed increase) do they draw the line? "I don't know their answer and I don't know if they know their answer, but it's an interesting question if you want to look at the whole thing philosophically, if you want to balance the whole thing between zero and unlimited growth."

Lynn DeFreitas, director of Friends of Great Salt Lake, said she and others do know their answer, but it's not as simple as picking a number.

"If I was going to shoot from the hip, I'd say, 'Stay the way you are, don't expand,' " she said.

But, she said, the real answer is that nobody can say how many acres of Great Salt Lake can be impounded for salt ponds, or used for other things, without hurting the lake.

Not her, not GSL, not anyone. The lake is too big, too complex an ecosystem, she said. It defies "simple" answers. There are too many "unknown unknowns."

'Thousand cuts'

Don Paul, a former avian biologist for the division of Wildlife Resources and now a private consultant, said GSL is not the enemy, just part of a disturbing trend.

“The lake is just suffering death by a thousand cuts,” he said. He compared the lake to a diamond for its values as an ecological resource, a widely changing habitat that shifts and responds to changing conditions, “whereas, to use the same analogy, those who live around it that do not understand it see it as coal as opposed to a diamond.”

The debate between GSL and the environmental community has simmered for years. It came to a head this month when GSL announced a trade with the state of Utah of leases the company holds near Ogden Bay for stateheld leases it wants in the lake’s north arm.

The trade

The company is giving up 30,000 acres of leases and gaining 37,000 acres. The trade is currently in a 30-day public comment period.

Officials from Utah’s Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands and the Division of Wildlife Resources praised the trade because the 30,000 acres near Ogden Bay are more useful to wildlife than the 37,000 acres in the lake’s north arm.

Several things concern FOGSL. The first is that those 37,000 acres would be on top of 33,000 acres of new evaporation ponds that GSL already wants to build.

Second is that 8,000 of those 33,000 acres, in Bear River Bay, are prime bird area right now.

Third, they are worried that, if GSL gets approval to impound the full 113,000 acres, that much sealed-off land will hamper the ability of the lake’s whole ecosystem to react to climate change and lake levels.

Tom Aldrich, avian water fowl specialist for the Division of Wildlife Resources, said the 8,000 acres that GSL is seeking approval to dike now shows how complex the problem is.

On recent bird tours, he said, the 8,000 acres “had an incredible amount of bird use. It relates to the Great Salt Lake level,” he said, now near historic lows.

Bird needs

Different waterfowl need different levels of water to feed. Right now, he said, that particular 8,000 acres is just the right depth for ducks and shorebirds. “They like water, but they like to have their feet on the ground,” he said; and deeper water doesn’t grow the food they need.

“Plus that area near Promontory is remote, incredibly remote,” he said. “It takes a lot of gasoline to get a boat up in there. I’d call it the sanctuary effect.”

Here’s what’s critical, he said: If the lake rises, that 8,000 acres might not be ideal for ducks and shorebirds anymore, but another part of the lake will.

It is that diversity of levels, the ability of waterfowl to always find somewhere to feed on the lake, that is just one aspect of what makes the lake so valuable as an ecosystem, he said. Every new development restricts the lake's ability to adapt.

DeFreitas said lack of knowledge of how industrial and other developments affect the whole lake is why Gov. Jon Huntsman, in August, formed a new Great Salt Lake Advisory Council on which both FOGSL and GSL sit.

The council is charged with looking at total management of the lake, not just piecemeal.

DeFreitas said she hopes the new council will serve as a platform for real control through a state commission with power to regulate.

Increased demand

Hyams, of GSL, said the company is as concerned with the environment and the lake as anyone, but also has to meet an increased worldwide demand for its products.

Plus, he said, GSL isn't the only stakeholder who has a voice here.

"To balance the finance, contributions to the economy, water rights, wildlife, there's a lot of stakeholders here other than bird fans," he said.

"Everyone needs to be heard and the development plans need to take all those things into mind in the most beneficial way. And one of the needs is the state's economy."

The Corps of Engineers will issue an Environmental Impact Statement sometime in 2009 on how it sees the GSL's proposed developments affecting the lake. Hyams said GSL is content to wait for that decision.

'A balance'

But GSL will continue to press its cause, he said, just as he is sure FOGSL and others will.

"It benefits the economy. There's a balance which all of society deals with, whether it's the Great Salt Lake or somewhere else, you can have the same discussion in dozens of other places around the country."

Great Salt Lake has been used for industrial purposes for all the time people have lived in Utah, he said, and that won't stop.

"You can't go back to 1848 with no people here."