

The Executive Water Task Force met yesterday, August 4 at the Department of Natural Resources. Lt. Governor Gary Herbert addressed the Task Force with respect to its new responsibility to provide the governor with recommendations for enhancing canal safety for 6600 miles of public and private water canals throughout the state. Lt. Governor Herbert stressed the urgency of the task at hand, emphasizing his perception that “our review and oversight [has been] inadequate-- particularly since we’re the fastest growing state in the nation.” He charged the group to start asking the right questions: “Who is responsible? What is local government’s role? What is a high hazard canal? What about multiple use of canals? What is the state’s responsibility? How can we better assess canal safety? What are funding sources for canal improvements? Are there better methods for moving surface water?”

Rick Ellis, from the Utah Geologic Survey presented his thoughts on the recent canal break in Cache County. He stressed multiple causes for the canal break—including irrigation of lands surrounding the canals and public use of the canals as storm water conveyance systems.

Sterling Brown, Utah Farm Bureau lobbyist, heads a subcommittee of the Task Force assigned to address these issues. Mr. Brown noted that the subcommittee considered taxing the population surrounding the canals for tax revenues to fortify the canals and providing private canal companies with immunity from liability for negligently maintained canals. Warren Peterson, who is also on the subcommittee, placed the blame of poorly fortified canals on the public, which surrounds them. “These canals weren’t a hazard until people started to live around them. ***It is clear that the community has externalized the cost of new development on the canal company.***”

Most of the Executive Water Task Force appeared to want to place blame on “communities”, which allow development and appear to want local government to be the funding source and regulatory body for canal safety. The Executive Water Task Force is clearly stacked with interests, which would like to pass blame from the canal companies to anyone they can (other than the state or the canal companies).

It is interesting to note that, independently, the Land Use Task Force has been discussing the role of public and private irrigation canals in the subdivision process. From the developer’s perspective, the canal companies hold them hostage for system-wide improvements to canal systems in exchange for getting the canal company to sign off on subdivision plats.

Local governments appear to be smack dab in the middle of the controversy, both as potential regulators, but also as potential contributors to canal surcharging during storm water events.

Both the Executive Water Task Force and the Land Use Task Force will continue to study the problem and develop proposals to enhance canal safety.

For a surprisingly accurate account of the Executive Water Task Force, see also [http://www.sltrib.com/news/ci\\_12992357](http://www.sltrib.com/news/ci_12992357) and [http://www.sltrib.com/news/ci\\_12992378](http://www.sltrib.com/news/ci_12992378)