Joel Ferry Testimony

A Regional Scientific Assessment of Saline Lakes and Their Wetlands is Needed

I am Representative Joel Ferry and I represent house District 1 in the State of Utah House of Representatives.

My family has been farming next to Great Salt Lake in Box Elder County for more than 120 years. Our land and way of life are intertwined with the lake and its wetlands. That is why I am applauding Representative Moore's recently introduced legislation that is good for saline lakes.

Our farmland borders miles of the Bear River where it flows into the delta that feeds Bear River Bay and the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. As a fifth-generation farmer on this land, my family and I work hard to maintain wetland habitat that benefits the land and the environment. Our fields often fill with flocks of White-faced Ibis feeding on bugs, or ducks and geese foraging on corn stubble during the late fall. These birds and other species need more than just Great Salt Lake to survive – often relying on other water bodies throughout the Western Hemisphere, especially Great Basin saline lakes.

Despite natural variations in water flows over time, we also are seeing a long-term decline of water levels at Great Salt Lake as seen in some 150 years of data.

Great Salt Lake provides recreational, wildlife, and business benefits, generating more than $1.32 billion in economic output annually. The "lake effect" also benefits snowpack in the nearby mountains, contributing to ski slopes and water supplies. Yet, we've seen that when other terminal lakes (like California's Owens Lake) lose their water supplies the harm can be costly—exposing dust that can harm health or damage crops and property values. Utah's leadership recognizes the need to be proactive when it comes to the lake. In 2019, I joined other Utah legislators in unanimously adopting the *Concurrent Resolution to Address Declining Water Levels of the Great Salt Lake (HCR010),* also signed by Governor Herbert.

Keeping our watersheds, rivers, and lakes—like Great Salt Lake, Utah Lake, and Bear Lake--healthy and functioning is critical for Utah's future. It is also a critical factor in maintaining working farms and ranches that are the backbone to our rural communities. That will be no simple feat in the face of increasing population, projected water demands, and warmer temperatures leading to increased evaporation. Yet, Utah agencies and leaders are exploring policy ideas and practical opportunities for reducing water consumption, while also identifying technical studies and data needed to find the best possible way forward.

That is why the bipartisan legislation recently introduced by Representative Moore (Utah) is so important. *H.R. 5345 - Saline Lake Ecosystems in the Great Basin States Program Act of 2021* – sets the stage for providing resources to develop technical and science-based information and data that local managers and stakeholders can use to inform water management decisions and balance tradeoffs. The legislation directs the US Geological Survey to work with other federal, state, local and tribal agencies, and other stakeholders, to conduct a regional assessment of saline lakes in the Great Basin.

I firmly believe in using science and technical data to make good decisions. We rely on science and data to make our farming operation sustainable – assessing crop yields to determine how fields are performing, or analyzing nutrient levels in crops to decide what fertilizers to apply.

The assessment and monitoring effort envisioned by this legislation can help inform Utah and neighboring states about what is happening at these Western saline lakes and what actions could help conserve them for generations to come.

Representative Joel Ferry
Utah House District 1