

Edition: All
Page: A01

New commission targets Utah Lake's image

By Amy Choate-Nielsen
Deseret Morning News

PROVO — Utah Lake has been called muddy, stinky and repulsive by some, but to Reed Price, Utah County's natural body of water is beautiful.

That's why one of Price's primary goals as the first-ever, newly appointed executive director of the Utah Lake Commission is to try to change the minds of those who look down on the lake. He's also determined to fight off invasive plant species, deal with carp overpopulation and encourage responsible development along the miles and miles of Utah Lake's shoreline.

"What would please me most would be to see a change in public perception about the lake," Price said. "I think (Utah Lake) has an unfair way about it. It is seen as a dirty, messy lake. If you look at water quality standards, there are a couple of levels that aren't where they're supposed to be, but otherwise, it's a pretty clean lake."

Price says Utah Lake is unique as one of the largest bodies of fresh water in the nation, and compared to the ponds Price was raised around in Kansas, it's practically crystal clear.

"I grew up with muddy lakes that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face in," Price said. "I never would have thought (Utah Lake) was an eyesore, but when you compare it to the lakes in the mountains, it is a little different."

For the past several years, Price has worked as an employee of Orem, first as a water-quality examiner of the city's waste-water treatment center, then as an assistant in the city manager's office. Monday was Price's official first day as executive director of the lake commission, but already his plate is getting pretty full.

One of the commission's first objectives is to develop a master plan for developing the lake, but first, Price has to get unpacked.

"We need to get the office set up, work on the policy manual, deal with administrative items — it will take a while to get done," Price said. "I honestly have no idea what the next month will bring, but we'll attack it on a day by day basis. The main thing is to promote the mission of the lake commission."

The Utah Lake Commission was officially established in March as an

organization determined to help direct the lake's future. Members, who include representatives from state departments, Utah County and local cities that border the lake, maintain that the commission is not out to control the lake's rightful property owners but to provide useful information when and where it is needed.

The master plan, which will be paid for by the lake commission, will be a useful source of information, said Utah County Commissioner Larry Ellertson, who is also the commission's vice chairman.

"The primary thing is, (the master plan) would be a resource not only for the cities but also for developers," Ellertson said. "They could say, 'If I want information on Utah Lake, here is where I go.' It brings a single point of contact.... The master plan will be a guiding tool, but the other information will also be something that is important."

Among the commission's members are representatives from Utah's Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Environmental Quality and the Central Utah Water Conservancy District. Occasionally representatives from the other agencies will present information to the lake commission on issues surrounding the lake that need to be dealt with.

David Wham of the Utah Division of Water Quality recently told the commission about the danger of an overgrowth of algae and invasive phragmites, or non-native marsh plants, that surround the lake. The algae is a threat to the lake's ecosystem and the phragmites are a fire threat, Wham said.

"I'm very encouraged with the effort that's been taken by the Utah Lake Commission," Wham said. "It's been neglected for a number of years, and now it's being realized for its full potential.... There was never a cohesive body that we could take these concerns (about Utah Lake) to in the past, but now we have the commission."

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