

Chapter 1

LAND

Key issues facing Utah's land

- 1.A Shared Responsibility: Managing Utah's Wildfire Risk
- 1.B Cut Flowers Are Blooming in Utah
- 1.C Relieving Pressure on Utah's Gateway Communities
- 1.D Evaluating Crossings at Parleys Canyon Overpass
- 1.E Urban Greenspace Shapes Utahns' Health

FISH OWL CANYON CONFLUENCE | KORI ANN KURTZEBORN

Chapter Introduction

BRIAN STEED

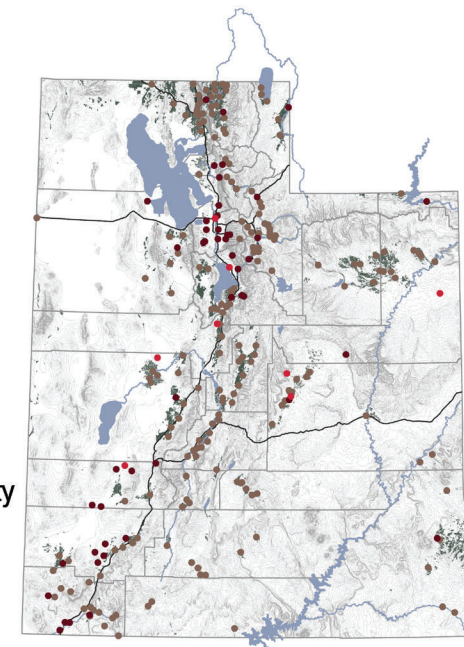
In 2025, land policy has been at the forefront of Utah's legislative agenda. The state's pursuit of greater authority regarding federally managed lands illustrates the ongoing issues of jurisdiction and supervision. These debates carry significant implications for energy development, recreation, conservation, and wildfire management. At the same time, lawmakers advanced measures regarding state lands, including those with the aim of better managing wildland-urban interfaces, wildlife areas, recreation areas and trust lands.

Utah's rapid population growth continues to put pressure on working lands, housing, and infrastructure. Discussions around zoning, development, and transportation highlight how land use decisions intersect with water supply, air quality, and economic resilience. In rural areas, gateway communities at the edge of national parks and public lands are experiencing unprecedented visitation and growth, prompting interest in new planning resources to sustain both local character and statewide tourism revenues. Agricultural towns face the loss of farmland to development and the need for irrigation efficiency, while energy towns are navigating transitions in markets, regulations, and technology that shape their future viability.

These kinds of places—gateway, energy, and agricultural towns—along with others, serve as a reminder that land issues are not abstract. They affect communities large and small across every region of the state. For lawmakers, this means that decisions about Utah's land are never just about acres or ownership boundaries; they are about the resilience of local economies, the stewardship of landscapes, and the quality of life for Utahns in every county.

Figure 1.1.1 Power Generation Facilities, Gateway Communities, and Agricultural Lands in Utah

- Power Generation Facility
- Large Power Generation Facility (>300 Megawatt Capacity)
- Gateway Community
- Agricultural Land



Map Created by Kori Ann Kurtzeborn, Data from Office of Energy Development, GNAR Initiative, and Division of Water Resources



Shared Responsibility: Managing Utah's Wildfire Risk

JAMIE BARNES

H.B. 48 mitigates the growing threat of wildfires to Utah communities by updating building standards, addressing insurance issues, and identifying and managing high-risk WUI areas.

Terms to Know:

WUI (wildland-urban interface): Where houses and development meet or intermingle with wildland vegetation.

Living in the wildland urban interface (WUI), where development meets wildland areas, comes with an increasing risk of catastrophic wildfire. Elsewhere in the United States, neighborhoods and towns that aren't prepared for wildfires have had significant impacts on states that must address insurance shortfalls from wildfire catastrophe. Utah has a clear path to significantly reduce wildfire risk while safeguarding against the economic impacts.

House Bill 48 (2025) introduces a step towards mitigating wildfire risks within the WUI and confronting insurance issues in these areas. Many homeowners living in the WUI are understandably concerned with the state of Utah's risk for wildfire and their ability to obtain insurance when living in these high-risk areas. However, many are also unaware that their actions can significantly improve their home's survivability when a wildfire occurs, as well as manage the implications associated with high

insurance premiums or the potential risk of uninsurability. This legislation places a greater shared responsibility on homeowners and local authorities to implement preventive measures for wildfires on Utah's landscape. At the same time, the bill also addresses insurer responsibility regarding the high-risk WUI area boundary, cancellation of policies, and/or increases in policy premiums.

H.B. 48 incentivizes risk reduction efforts at the individual parcel level through lot assessments and property fees for those living in the high-risk WUI. Property owners can reduce these fees through actions informed by the lot assessments, which provide education and recommendations for home hardening and defensible space actions. The lot assessment risk ratings will be available to insurers to document the steps homeowners take to create defensible space and home hardening, creating a more wildfire-resilient landscape.



OGDEN WILDFIRE SMOKE FROM I-15 | AARON FORTIN

Many homeowners living in the WUI are understandably concerned with the state of Utah's risk for wildfire and their ability to obtain insurance when living in these high-risk areas.

WILDFIRE SMOKE SEEN FROM PANGUITCH, UT | AARON FORTIN

Cut Flowers Are Blooming in Utah

MELANIE STOCK

Cut flowers are a surging new crop that is popular with residents and profitable for farms in Utah.

Terms to Know:
Protected crops: Plants grown under protection (greenhouses, tunnels, covers) from weather or pests.

In recent years, cut flower crops rapidly emerged as a leading solution for both small- and large-scale farms to maximize returns. Utah experienced significant growth since 2018, with an average of 30 new flower farms per year. Today, there are well over 200 growers, primarily women, and a Utah Cut Flower Farm Association that is a proven model for other states. Utah's flower farmers are highly entrepreneurial and reaching new revenue channels, which includes sales to florists and wholesale distributors; consumers through farmers' markets, farm stands, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares; and agritourism from you-pick experiences to hosted events. In 2021, it was estimated that this contributed up to \$1.3M in state tax revenue.

A local, profitable niche has been made for flowers that are scented, have a short vase life, or are prone to damage

during transport, and they are able to compete well with imports. As the market demand exceeds supply, however, improving crop yields, quality, and timing are essential. USU targets these needs with crop research that leads to management recommendations tailored to Utah's soils, water, sun exposure, pests, seasonal weather, and consumers. As trials led to regionally optimized production, crops with previous net negative income potentials grew to values nearly unmatched for farms. For example, net returns averaged \$2.50 per sq. ft. for most flowers, while some reached \$5.00 per sq. ft. In comparison, protected strawberries and peppers reached \$1.45 and \$2.12 per sq. ft., respectively. With continued investment in research, grower partnerships, and outreach, the state's cut flower industry is well-positioned for sustained growth.



KELLIE WEBB AT THE NORTH OGDEN FLOWER FARM | AARON FORTIN



NORTH OGDEN FLOWER FARM | AARON FORTIN

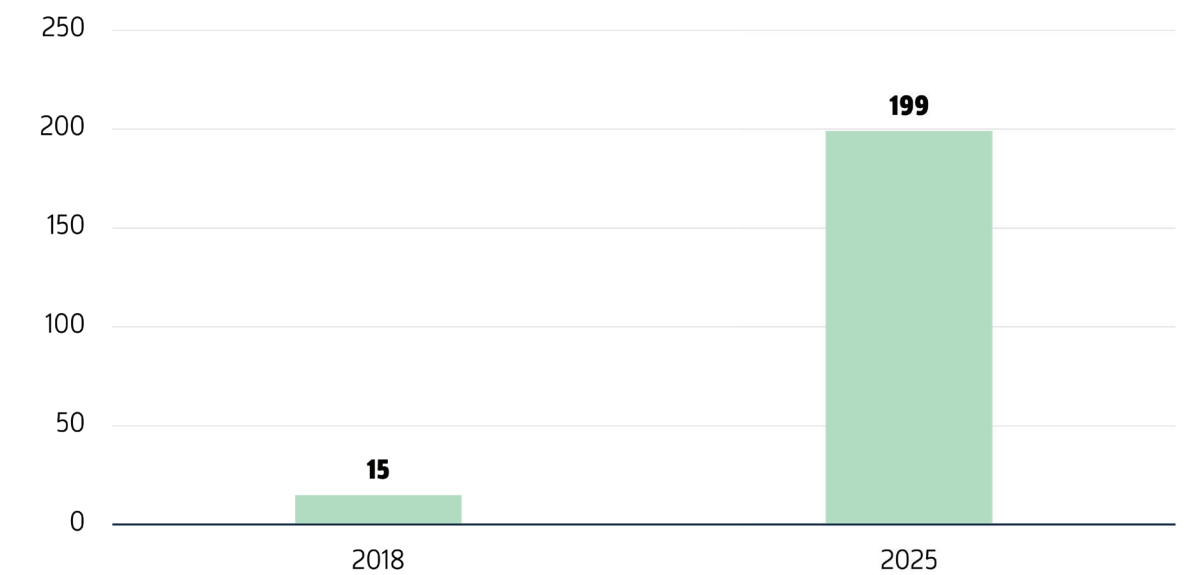


GREENVILLE RESEARCH FARM IN NORTH LOGAN, UT | LEVESIMMS

Figure 1.B.1 Average Net Returns for Flowers vs. Protected Crops

| | Flowers | Strawberries | Peppers |
|------------------------------|-------------|--------------|---------|
| Average Net Return per sq ft | \$2.50-5.03 | \$1.45 | \$2.12 |

Figure 1.B.2 Number of Utah Flower Growers by Year



Relieving Pressure on Utah's Gateway Communities

JAKE POWELL, JORDAN SMITH, & DANYA RUMORE



Unique housing, transportation, and economic challenges face recreation gateway communities. How they are addressed will shape the future of Utah's iconic landscapes and the people living in them.

Utah's gateway communities—critical to a \$9.5 billion recreation economy—face mounting challenges from growth, tourism, and limited resources, and the GNAR (Gateway Natural Amenity Region) Initiative at USU is working to help them thrive while preserving what makes them unique.

Gateway communities are the front doors to Utah's world-class landscapes—places that attract millions of visitors each year and underpin a recreation industry contributing an estimated \$9.5 billion to Utah's economy in 2023. Sustaining that economic engine comes at a cost.

Across Utah and the West, many of these towns are being “discovered.” Once primarily destinations to visit, they are increasingly becoming sought-after places to live and work. This transition brings complex planning and management challenges—often to communities with limited budgets, small staffs, and few opportunities to share solutions with peers facing similar pressures.

Seasonal transportation bottlenecks, affordable housing shortages, workforce retention, strained infrastructure, loss of community character, along with degradation of natural and recreational resources, are no longer occasional concerns—they are defining issues. How gateway communities address them will shape the future of both Utah's iconic landscapes and the people who call these places home.

The GNAR Initiative, launched at Utah State University in January 2020, is a cross-disciplinary effort to help communities meet gateway challenges. Housed within the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism and fully-funded through grants and contracts, the GNAR Initiative's mission is simple: “to help western gateway communities, and their surrounding public lands, thrive and preserve the things that make them special.”

Learn more about the GNAR Initiative at: extension.usu.edu/gnar/



RICHFIELD, UT, CENTER STREET | AARON FORTIN



GARDEN CITY, UT | AARON FORTIN

Evaluating Crossings at Parleys Canyon Overpass

NICKI FREY & BLAKE LEDBETTER

While unconventional in size, the Parleys Canyon Overpass successfully facilitates movement for deer and moose. This contributes to population health and decreased wildlife-vehicle collisions.

Terms to Know:

Ungulate: Hoofed mammal like deer, elk, moose, or bison.

Roadways threaten migratory ungulates by creating a barrier to movements and preventing access to seasonal migration routes. To mitigate these conflicts, state transportation agencies often install wildlife crossing structures to allow animals to safely cross over or under roadways. In 2018, the Utah Department of Transportation installed a uniquely narrow overpass in Parleys Canyon, across Interstate 80. Researchers at USU studied if mule deer and moose would use the structure. Using trail cameras installed along Parley's Canyon Overpass from May 2020- September 2024, they recorded wildlife use of the overpass. Over 4,300 unique visits to the overpass were counted, involving at least 34 species. The most common animal detected in the vicinity of the overpass were mule deer, with more than 3,600 visits to the site, and about one

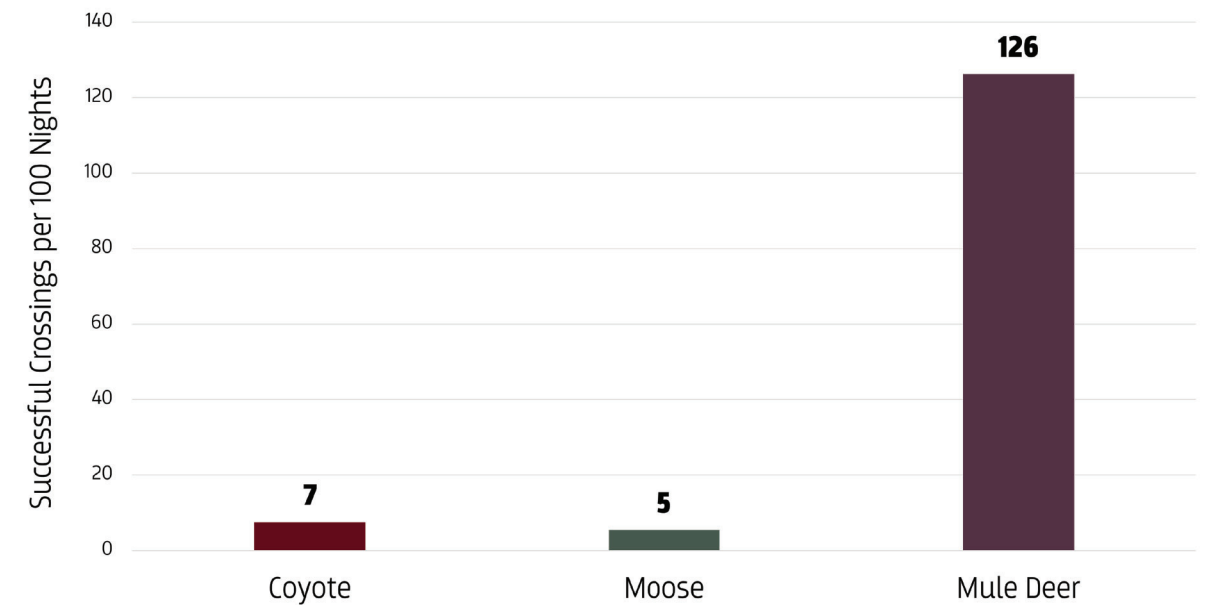
crossing per day. By comparison, they detected moose in the area near the overpass about 150 times, an average of 5 crossings per 100 nights, and coyotes were detected 500 times, with seven crossings per 100 nights. Most of the time (98%) when a deer or moose attempted to cross the overpass, they successfully completed this crossing. Elk were rarely detected in the vicinity of the overpass, with only three successful crossings during the study. Parleys Canyon Overpass, while unconventional in size, was quickly and successfully used by wildlife, resolving a barrier to crossing Interstate 80. This facilitation of movement for deer and moose will contribute to the overall health of these populations while decreasing dangerous wildlife-vehicle collisions, with an estimated \$15 million taxpayer savings in motor vehicle collisions over its lifetime.



Figure 1.D.1 Trail cameras recorded a mule deer crossing Parleys Canyon Overpass



Figure 1.D.2 Average Wildlife Crossing Success per 100 Nights



Urban Greenspace Shapes Utahns' Health

HUAQING WANG



Urban greenspace helps people live healthier lives—but the shape of spaces and their connectivity matters as much as size.

Terms to Know:

Greenspace: Vegetated land in urban spaces including parks, street trees, and green trails.

Utahns often think of parks, trees, and green areas as a way to beautify communities but research increasingly shows that urban greenspace is a powerful public health tool. It can help reduce chronic diseases, improve mental well-being, and even lower the risk of early death.

But here's the surprising part: it's not just about having more greenspace. How that greenspace is designed and distributed—its size, shape, and how well it's connected—can make a big difference. In studies of neighborhoods across the U.S., lower rates of conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and depression were demonstrated in neighborhoods with better access to connected greenspace. These greenspaces support physical activity, reduce exposure to extreme

heat and air pollution, and may enhance mental health through access to nature and biodiversity.

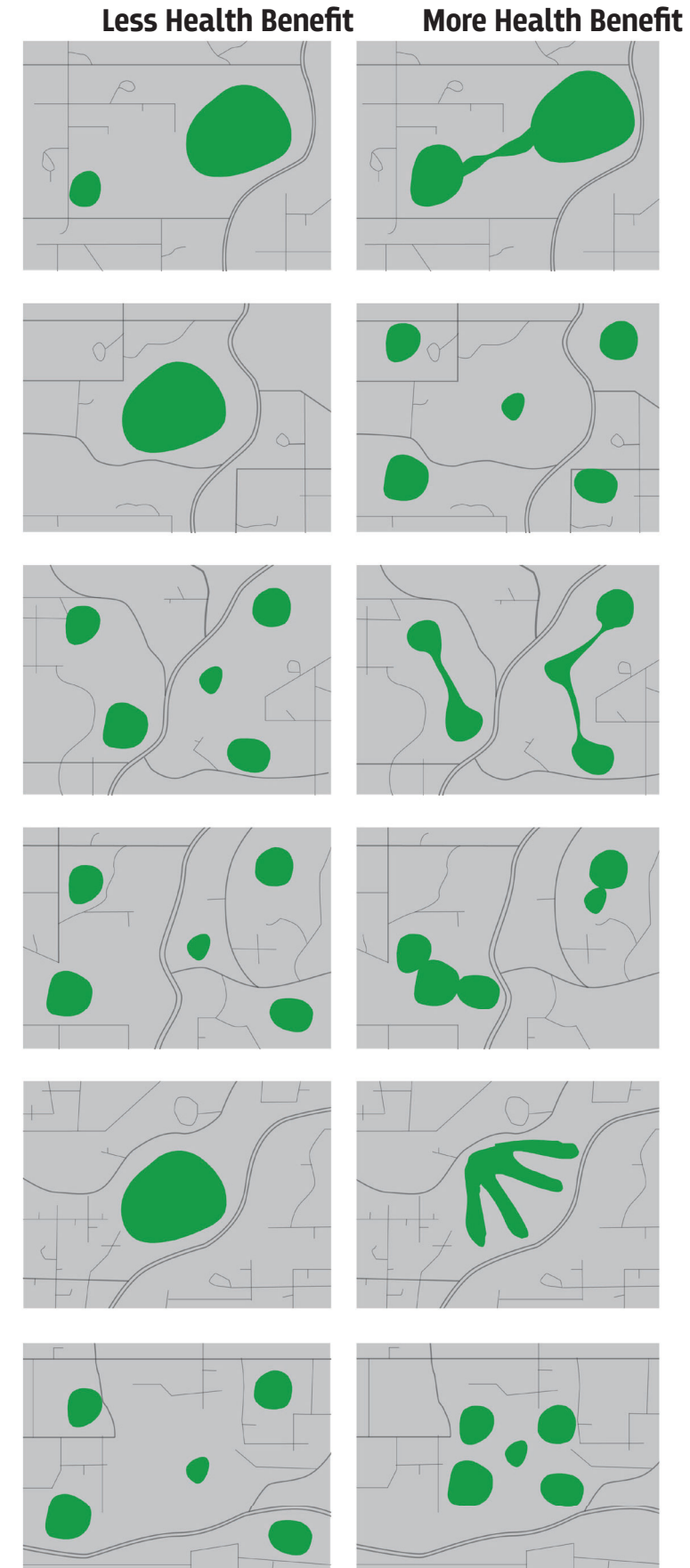
This has big implications for growing Utah communities. As city and town leaders plan parks, trails, and green corridors, they have the opportunity to shape the built environment in ways that promote long-term health. Greenspace is more than an amenity—it's a kind of infrastructure that supports healthier, more resilient neighborhoods.

Investing in well-designed, accessible, and connected greenspaces isn't just good urban planning—it's disease prevention. As Utah continues to grow, designing greenspaces with health in mind will help ensure our communities thrive.



DIMPLE DELL REGIONAL PARK | AARON FORTIN

Figure 1.E.1 Greenspace Morphology Examples



Larger and more connected greenspaces provide more recreational opportunities than smaller, scattered areas.

Greenspaces clustered along neighborhood roads increase passive exposure to vegetation while traveling to and from work.

More complex shapes offer longer boundaries and increased opportunities to stay longer within greenspaces.



BUTLER WASH CLIFF DWELLINGS | MICHELLE SMITH



Land

NAVAJO NATIONAL MONUMENT CLIFF DWELLINGS | MICHELLE SMITH

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Utah's LAND in the news

During the past year, we tracked Utah and national news on key land issues and topics that appeared in media outlets.

1. WILDFIRES IN UTAH

The 2025 fire season was among the worst in Utah's history for human-caused ignitions, both in number of fires and in acres burned. More than 70% of the state's fires were started by people, burning over 100,000 acres. With the entire state experiencing some level of drought, officials urged constant vigilance when recreating outdoors. Several communities experienced evacuations as state and federal firefighters worked to protect homes and infrastructure.

2. DEBATE OVER PUBLIC LAND CONTROL AND SALES

Efforts to transfer or sell federal public lands to state or private control drew significant attention this year. A top court refused to hear Utah's claim over millions of acres of federally managed land, while federal legislative proposals to authorize public land sales faced broad opposition and did not advance.

3. FEDERAL POLICY SHIFTS AFFECTING LAND MANAGEMENT

The new presidential administration advanced changes intended to speed up environmental reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), while also reducing staffing levels in federal land agencies. Together, these actions reshaped how projects on public lands are reviewed and how agencies manage recreation, grazing, and energy permitting.

4. CONSERVATION EASEMENTS AND LAND TRUSTS GAIN MOMENTUM

Utah saw growth in the use of conservation easements and land trusts as tools to preserve open space and farmland. Program funds, alongside nonprofit land trusts, are providing agricultural producers and landowners more options to protect working lands while maintaining economic viability. These mechanisms are gaining bipartisan support as ways to balance growth pressures with preserving Utah's agricultural and cultural landscapes.

5. RECREATION PRESSURES ON ICONIC LANDSCAPES

Communities surrounding Utah's most-visited destinations—including Moab, Zion National Park, and Bear Lake—are experiencing increasing strain from tourism, population growth, and infrastructure demands. Seasonal traffic, affordable housing shortages, and environmental impacts are pressing concerns. These challenges are prompting local, state, and academic initiatives aimed at sustaining Utah's \$9.5 billion recreation economy while protecting the places that drive it.

What's going on in Utah's land, water and air?

We publish a weekly email newsletter containing a roundup of stories in the media related to Utah's land, water, and air. This year, we shared nearly 2,000 stories, primarily from local media, with additional coverage from national outlets. Subscribe to our weekly email news roundup at: usu.edu/ilwa/newsletter.



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