Extension
UtahStateUniversity

Agricultural Irrigation Collaborative

Agriculture Water Use and Economic Value in the Great Salt Lake Basin

Watershed: An area where all water drains to the same place.

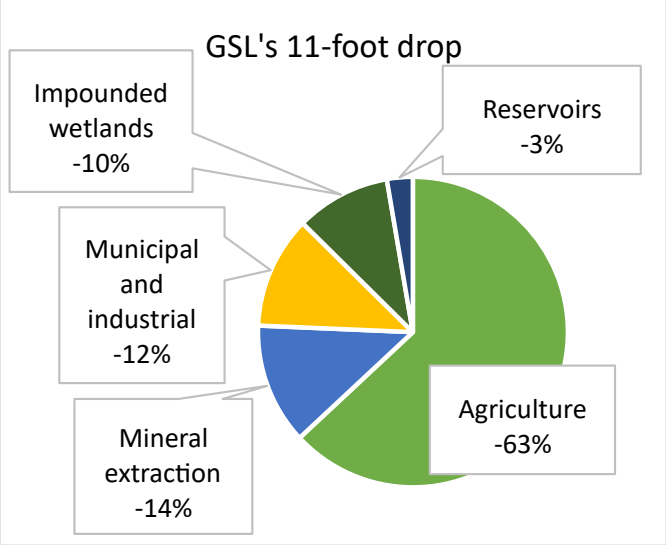
Consumptive Use: Water that's used up and doesn't return.

Acre-Foot: Enough water to cover 1 acre of land 1 foot deep (about **326,000 gallons**).

Withdrawal: Water taken from rivers or reservoirs.

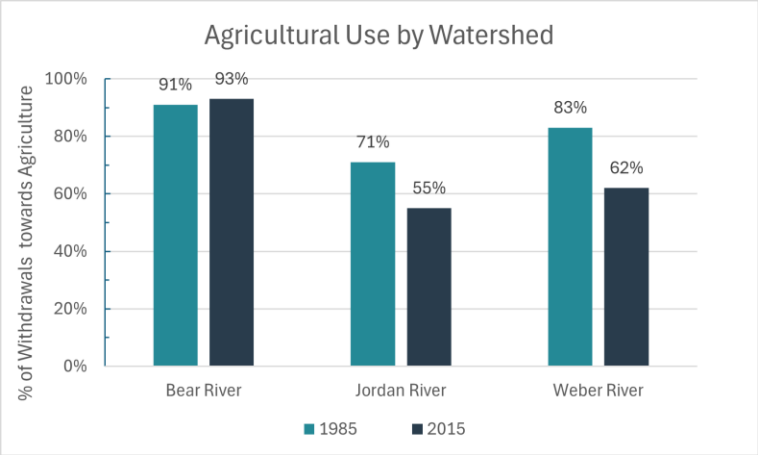
Farm Cash Receipts: Money farmers earn from selling crops or livestock, before processing or added value.

The Great Salt Lake (GSL) has shrunk by 11 feet in elevation and lost 50% of its surface area—primarily due to human water use. Agriculture accounts for 63% of this long-term loss, with additional impacts from mineral, municipal, and industrial uses.



From 1985 to 2015, Utah's agricultural irrigation withdrawals in the GSL Basin fell by 30% (about 588,000 acre-feet), while about 52,000 acres of irrigated land were lost—mostly to urban growth. Despite this, agriculture remains the largest water user in some watersheds: 93% of Bear River, 62% of Weber, and 55% of Jordan River withdrawals in 2015 went to agriculture.

Economically, irrigated agriculture is vital. In 2022, farm cash receipts in the basin totaled nearly $881 million, with input spending estimated around $760 million. Combined with food processing, the sector contributes over $1.6 billion annually to Utah's economy. The GSL itself adds another $1.9 billion per year through ecosystem and industrial services.



View Full Factsheet:
https://extension.usu.edu/irrigation/research/agricultural-water-use-salt-lake-basin

Authors: Matthew Reyes, Cody Zesiger, Burdette Barker, Sarah Null, Earl Creech, Matt Yost, Ryan Larsen, Josh Dallin, Utah State University Extension, June 2025