



Leadership and Accountability in the Utah Legislature Series

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Part 4 of 6. Stewardship is not anti-prosperity. It is how prosperity lasts.

Stewardship of our environment is often treated as separate from jobs, affordability, health or economic growth. Of course, the reality is that these are all inter-related. Problems ensue when our lawmakers pretend they're separate.

Our economy, health, and quality of life depend on the air we breathe, the water our communities and farms use, and relatively predictable weather patterns. While so-called "environmentalists" are often pitted against so-called "business-friendly" people, what mostly differentiates these people is how they think about who benefits today versus who carries the risks tomorrow.

In December 2025, ten young Utahns sued state regulators, arguing that permits for coal, oil and gas development threaten their health and constitutional rights. They are building on a recent case in Montana in which that Republican-dominated state's Supreme Court ruled 6–1 that government could not ignore climate damage when approving fossil-fuel projects. The harms of climate change are serious and unmistakable, for anyone who cares enough to look at them honestly, regardless of where you fall on the political spectrum.

Against that context, Utah's Legislature passed HB 222. The law broadly shields fossil fuel corporations from liability for climate-related harm unless plaintiffs can demonstrate violation of a specific emissions limit or permit. Utah has no general state limit on how much carbon pollution an emitter may release. So, in effect, even in cases where people can demonstrate direct harm from carbon pollution, this bill leaves Utahns bearing the consequences with essentially no civil recourse against the polluters. Rep. Jason Thompson voted for it.

Supporters say HB 222 protects Utah energy producers from frivolous lawsuits. I don't buy it. I don't think you should either. Courts already dismiss claims that lack evidence or legal merit. This bill goes much further.

We are already seeing climate-related harms escalate. This bill makes it much harder for those getting harmed to have their case heard.

For example, millions of Americans are already finding homeowners insurance harder to obtain or afford. A [U.S. Treasury analysis](#) found premiums rose 8.7% faster than inflation from 2018 through 2022. Homeowners in the highest-risk areas paid 82% more, and their



nonrenewal rates were about 80% higher. I'm hearing these same concerns from many people in our community. For a family whose home is their largest asset, a nonrenewal notice snaps people out of any illusion that climate change is an abstract debate. It can threaten their mortgage, savings, ability to sell the home, and sense of security. I have deep empathy for families caught there. By voting for HB 222, Jason Thompson made it much harder for those families to have their day in court.

Insurance companies are not always fair. But the risks behind their decision-making are real. As I wrote in the Salt Lake Tribune after the Los Angeles fires last year, wildfire risk is not going away. The laws of physics, and insurance math, don't care about our politics. We can't deny our way out of this problem.

Yet HB 222 moves accountability in the opposite direction. Fossil-fuel companies keep the profits. Homeowners absorb rising premiums. Taxpayers fund disaster recovery. Families pay the health costs of heat, smoke and polluted air. Thompson's vote placed more of the growing risk on ordinary Utahns while protecting powerful industries from responsibility.

The same short-term thinking appears elsewhere in his record. Thompson supported HB 70, requiring Utah to preserve aging coal infrastructure, and SB 132, which cleared a pathway for extraordinarily large new electricity users before Utah established adequate guardrails. He also supported HB 264, which shortened or eliminated clean-energy tax incentives. These votes preserve dirtier systems, invite immense new demand, and make cleaner alternatives less attractive.

Then there is Great Salt Lake.

Utah has spent more than \$1 billion on water conservation, infrastructure, studies and programs. Some projects have value. But too much of the response has involved moving money around rather than moving water to the lake. The central problem remains: human consumption upstream exceeds what a healthy lake can sustain.

Recovering the Great Salt Lake isn't just about refilling a hole in the ground. Great Salt Lake is about public health, our air, our housing market, attracting and retaining businesses, it's about protecting 350 species of birds and other wildlife. And more than anything, it's about deciding who we are as a people. Are we a people who refused to accept that we live in a world with some physical limits? Or are we going to be the first people in the world to recover a large saline lake that has been severely degraded?

The lake does not respond to press releases, appropriations or bill counts. It responds to water. Yet lawmakers still have not had the honest conversation about how much



consumptive use must decline, how conserved water will reach the lake, and how the transition can be fair to farmers, cities and communities.

These failures are not for a lack of information. It is a lack of political courage.

Thompson did not create this decades-old failure. But he has joined a legislative majority that celebrates activity and spending money while avoiding accountability and the outcomes that matter. Utah needs representatives willing to define the goal, quantify the gap, listen to those who will bear the costs, and make the hard decisions required to restore the lake.

I would approach these issues with humility, curiosity, scientific expertise and compassion. I don't pretend there are easy answers, but we're only going to solve this by starting to ask the right questions and by refusing to hide the harms.

Stewardship means refusing to cash in on private gains today by handing the costs to our children and neighbors tomorrow. Stewardship isn't anti-prosperity. It is the only way real prosperity lasts.