

Utah's Collaborative Approach to Building a Wetland Program Plan



Jessica Stern, State Wetland Coordinator



Presentation Outline

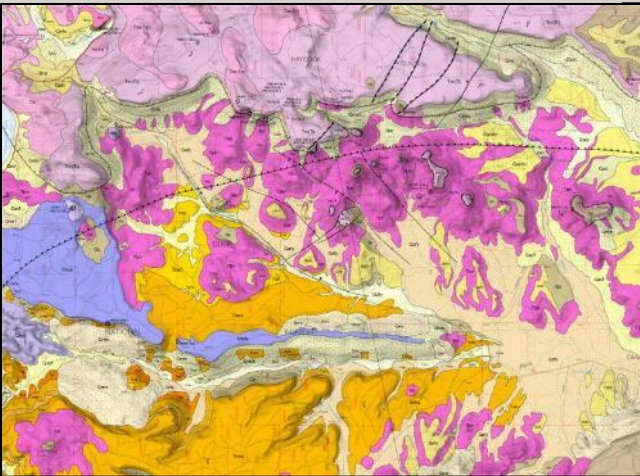
- Information on the Utah Geological Survey (UGS) and the Groundwater and Wetlands Program
- History of the Utah Wetland Program and the Utah Wetland Working Group (WWG)
- Our collaborative process for updating Utah's Wetland Program Plan (WPP)



Utah Geological Survey

"...provides timely scientific information about Utah's geologic environment, resources and hazards"

Geologic Mapping



Energy & Minerals



Geologic Hazards



Paleontology



Groundwater & Wetlands

Quality and quantity of groundwater and wetland resources



Wetland Section

- Focus on providing “*timely scientific information*”
- Non-regulatory and no direct land management
- Projects primarily externally funded through grants and partnerships
- Wetland studies as required by the Utah Legislature



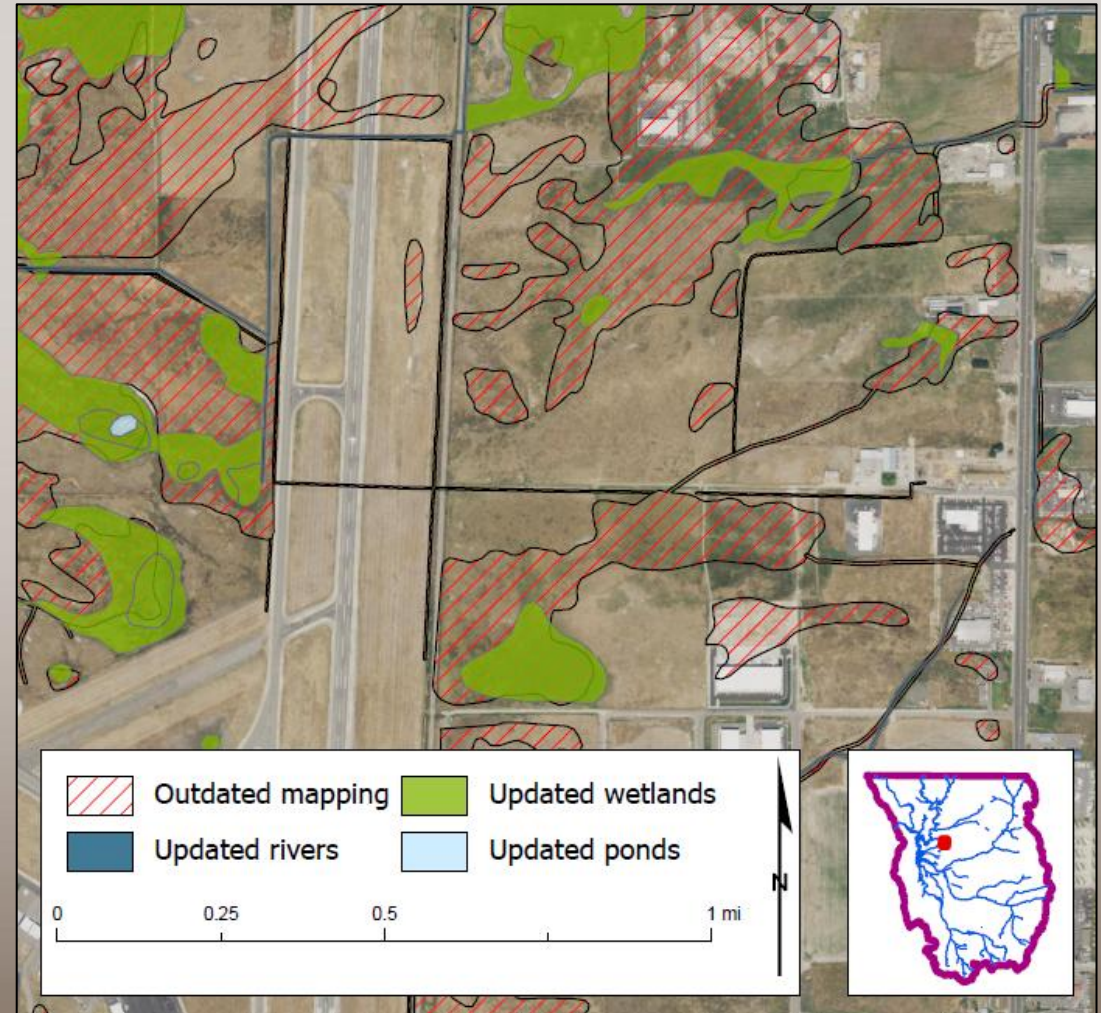
Wetland Field Assessments

- Collect basic information on soils, water quality, vegetation, stressors, and condition
- Studies conducted at three scales- watershed, ecoregion, and Great Salt Lake-specific



Wetland Mapping

- Produce spatial data on the location and types of wetlands, ponds, lakes, and streams
- Provide data to the federal National Wetlands Inventory (NWI)
- UGS online wetland mapper provides additional data and functionality beyond NWI



Comparison between 1980s and contemporary mapping in Cache Valley, Pete Goodwin

Utah's Wetland Program History

- Utah's state wetland program previously had two divisions represented from within the Department of Natural Resources:
 - The UGS
 - The Division of Water Quality (UDWQ)
- UDWQ ended their wetland monitoring program in 2020
- UGS became de facto state program for assessing wetland function and condition
- Previous WPPs were collaborative between UGS and UDWQ



Previous Wetland Program Plans

WPPs are voluntary plans encouraged by the Environmental Protection Agency that outline what a state, tribe, or program wants to accomplish over a particular period of time.

- 2011 – 2016, UGS and UDWQ
- 2018 – 2023, UGS and UDWQ
- 2026 – 2031, UGS and ??????



Collaboration

- The Utah WWG was established in 2015 as a statewide forum for coordination and collaboration on wetland science, management, and policy
- The goal of the group:
 - Raise awareness of the Utah wetland program
 - Provide a structured space for state, federal, academic, consultant, and nonprofit partners to share information, identify needs, and coordinate efforts
- Currently 230+ members across 35+ organizations
- Meet twice a year (once online, once in-person) and send semi-annual newsletters



Collaboration

- UGS wanted expert opinions on the direction of the next WPP for Utah
- UGS wanted to make sure that we were focusing on priority needs for the state
- Reaching as many voices as possible
- How to incorporate the WWG and partners?
 - Presenting at Tribal Leaders Council
 - Surveys
 - Focus Groups
 - Interviews



A screenshot of the "WATER & WETLANDS" website. The page has a dark blue header with the title "WATER & WETLANDS" in white. Below the header is a red "MAPS" button. The main content area is white and features the "UTAH WETLAND WORKING GROUP" section. This section includes a paragraph about the group's establishment in 2015, a list of "Upcoming Meetings" with a calendar icon and the text "WETLAND WORKING GROUP ANNUAL MEETING December 4th, 2025 - Location TBD", a "Previous Meetings" link, and a "Wetland Program Plans" section. The "Wetland Program Plans" section includes a paragraph about voluntary plans and a list of "Previous Wetland Program Plans" with links to "Wetland Program Plan, 2018-2023" and "Wetland Program Plan Addendum, 2016-2018".

Initial Outreach

- Created two surveys (WWG and Tribal Nations) via Google Forms
- Presented survey at Utah Tribal Leaders Council Meeting, emailed via formal consultation
- Sent separate survey to WWG members via email and through the spring newsletter
- Survey was 30 questions long, multiple choice and open answer



2025 Wetland Program Plan Survey

The Utah Geological Survey's (UGS) Groundwater and Wetlands Program is soliciting feedback from members of the Wetland Working Group to provide input in the development of a Wetland Program Plan.

Wetland Program Plan's (WPP) are voluntary plans encouraged by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that outline what a program wants to accomplish over a particular period of time. UGS' last WPP plan covered 2018-2023.

We are seeking input from members of the Working Group to help identify high priority needs for Utah's wetlands. Responses from this survey will help inform the goals and strategies that will be outlined in the WPP, and will help direct focus groups over the summer of 2025.



Survey Results

- 48 respondents from the WWG (22% response rate)
- Open-response answers were coded to identify themes and keywords

Statewide wetland priorities:

1. State wetland protections (in-lieu fee, mitigation banking, conservation fund)
2. Managing water use and groundwater withdrawal
3. Curbing wetland loss from development through local planning and ordinances
4. Conserving wetlands and protecting open space (easements, land trusts)
5. Continue to generate accurate NWI data



Survey Results

When asked to identify data or research gaps regarding wetlands that would benefit their own or their organizations' work, respondents provided general and specific answers.

Summarized answers, based on identified keywords and themes:

- Wetland monitoring and rapid assessment tools
- Accurate wetland mapping and NWI data
- Understanding groundwater relationships to wetlands
- Overall wetland health and condition data
- Mitigation and restoration effectiveness data
- Wetland outreach and public knowledge



Survey Results

Regarding updating and developing a strategic Wetland Program Plan to focus the UGS and Partners' work, please rank the following wetland action priorities by importance:

Rank	Category
1	Monitoring and Assessment
2	Mapping and Landscape Planning
3	Sustainable Funding
4	Regulations
5	Data Communication and Access
6	Water Quality Standards
7	Voluntary Restoration and Protection
8	Outreach, Education, and Engagement



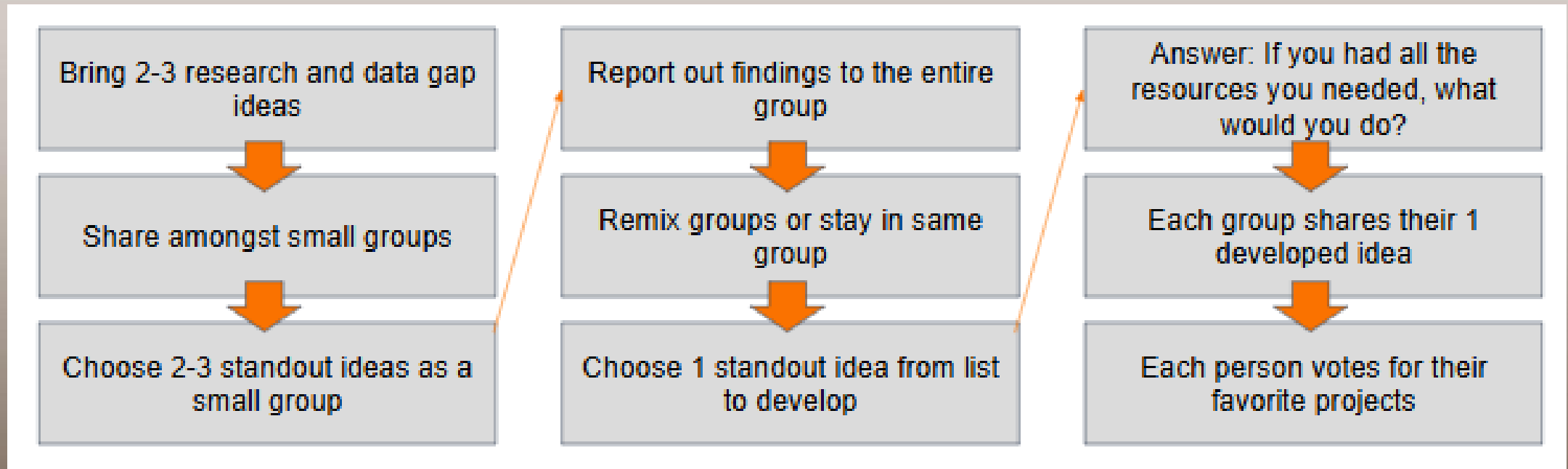
Focus Group Results

- Over 20 participants from 18 organizations
- Three groups with different topics:
 1. Mapping and Spatial Analysis; Planning, Policy, and Regulations
 2. Education, Outreach, and Engagement; Wetland Management
 3. Monitoring and Assessment; Restoration and Management



Focus Group Results

I asked participants to think creatively and out-of-the box to develop project ideas that did not have constraints:



Focus Group Results and Feedback

These ideas were refined and categorized, and will become a part of the actions within the next Wetland Program Plan.

Example projects developed during the meetings include:

- Developing connectivity data for aquatic resources across Utah
- Refine and reformat wetland reference condition data into easy-to-use resources for wetland managers.
- Expand outreach to private landowners and rural communities that focuses on the benefits of wetland conservation and restoration, with clear examples of viable and sustainable projects (such as beaver dam analogs).



2026 Utah Wetland Program Plan

The overall goal of Utah's WPP is:

To increase the availability of scientific data on Utah's wetlands by developing and deploying tools to assess wetland health and function; developing resources for voluntary wetland restoration, protection, and management; and fostering collaboration through outreach and partnerships.



2026 Utah Wetland Program Plan

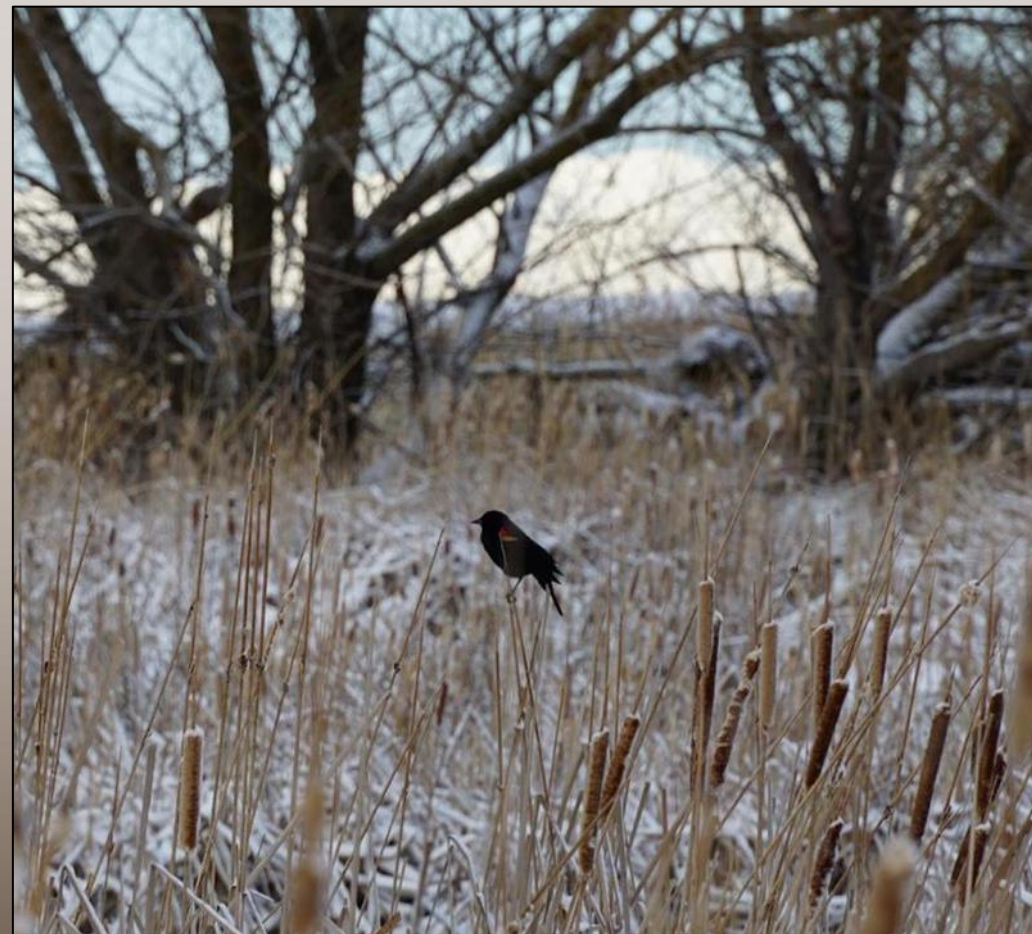
The updated Utah Wetland Program Plan has four categories, derived from WWG feedback and based on the EPA core elements:

1. Monitoring and Assessment
2. Mapping and Landscape Planning
3. Voluntary Restoration and Protection
4. Outreach and Data Dissemination



Next Steps

- WPP is currently in final internal UGS review
- Will cover 2026 - 2031
- Expected draft submittal to EPA in Fall 2026
- Opportunities for an addendum if additional research needs arise
- Continued outreach to WWG and Tribes



Questions?

Jessica Stern, UGS State Wetland Coordinator

jstern@utah.gov

801-537-3307

Funding

EPA Region 8 Wetland Program Development Grant

CD-00111401-0

Resources

UGS website: <https://geology.utah.gov/water/wetlands/>

EPA WPDG website: <https://www.epa.gov/wetlands/wetland-program-development-grants-and-epa-wetlands-grant-coordinators>

