

Duck, duck, goose

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While most Utahns have their minds on turkeys these days, we want to put in a good word for some ducks. Specifically, the millions of ducks and other waterfowl that stop by the Great Salt Lake during their seasonal migrations.

The Jordan River is one of the main sources of fresh water for the marshes on the south end of the lake that are critical habitat to migrating birds. The water quality of the Jordan is threatened by a project that will purify underground water in the southwest valley and discharge the sulfates and metals removed from that water into the river.

Kennecott Utah Copper Corp. and the Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District are working on the project, which would accomplish two worthwhile goals: It would stop the spread of an underground plume of water polluted by a century of mining, and it would provide a source of purified drinking water.

Unfortunately, as currently devised, the project also would add to pollution in the Jordan.

Fortunately, state officials recently have decided to take a second look at the discharge permit for the project in light of a new federal water quality standard for selenium, an element that is essential to waterfowl in trace amounts but is toxic in large quantities.

There is room for disagreement over whether the discharges currently anticipated will meet water quality standards and whether, over time, they will pose a toxic threat to birds and other wildlife. But recent tests at a duck-hunting club near the lake showed that selenium levels already are pushing the maximum allowed under the current federal standard.

Those tests are not conclusive, however, and more information needs to be gathered.

The project to remove pollutants from the groundwater in the southwest valley would divide the affected aquifer into two zones, each of which would be equipped with a treatment plant. Kennecott would operate one, and the water district the other. Wells would extract the water, and a reverse osmosis process would remove the contaminants.

The discharge of the contaminants extracted by the Kennecott plant would be fed into the company's slurry pipeline for disposal in its tailings ponds. As now proposed, the discharge from the district's plant would go into the Jordan near 2100 South.

The water district is studying ways to remove metals and selenium from the discharge at its plant. If that cannot be accomplished, Kennecott could be required to impound all of the contaminants from both plants on its property, which would increase the project's costs.

That cost must be paid, however, if it proves necessary to protect Great Salt Lake habitat that is essential to migrating birds from two continents. Utah water officials should take reasonable care to protect this resource.