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Activists try mainstream route to raise climate change awareness

Environment » Trust land board deflects groups' attempts to elicit personal views.

By JUDY FAHYS | The Salt Lake Tribune

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Utah climate activists only got partway through a presentation to the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration board Thursday before it snagged on a question: What do board members think about climate change and the science linking human activities to causing it?

The SITLA board, which oversees some 3.5 million acres, had set aside part of its regular monthly meeting to hear from Ryan Pluene of the iMatter climate-awareness group and his colleague Melanie Martin of the group Utah Tar Sands Resistance.

Though both have been part of climate protests in the past, their appearance before the SITLA board Thursday was part of a broader effort to address climate solutions within the existing structure of government.

"I am here today to ask you to consider some moral and spiritual guidelines about what lease you make — specifically around oil shale and tar sands," Pluene told the

board. "Besides the money [SITLA leases could generate], these unconventional fuels extractions will send us to a tipping point of not being able to mitigate for climate change."

Pluene, a science teacher, came prepared to discuss the link between the board's development of fossil fuels and accelerating climate changes — and ultimately the future of Utah's schoolchildren. But first he asked the board about its views on climate science.

Members declined, saying they were there to hear from him, not to share their personal views.

"The members who sit on the board have a fiduciary responsibility to the schoolchildren of the state of Utah to optimize the returns on the estate that is in their trust," said Board Chairman Michael R. Brown. "That is our sole purpose."

He did note, though, that the agency considers the environment in its decisions.

Martin said she was concerned that there was not enough study of the long-term impacts that a pending tar sands project might have on the state's land, water and air.

And she promised to send along information about the research she's done on the subject.

The board took no action on the 10-minute presentation, and they asked for details of Pluene's report.

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