

Beached boats, pink water as drought saps Great Salt Lake

September 22 2016, by Michelle L. Price



In this Dec. 29, 2015, file photo, the boat docks are seen at the Great Salt Lake at Antelope Island, in Utah, December 29, 2015. More than 100 boats are sitting high and dry in a parking lot on the southern shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake, unable to sail the shallow, drought-stricken sea nearby. The massive lake, key to the Utah's economy and identity, is skirting record low levels after years of below-average participation and record heat. (Chris Detrick/The Salt Lake Tribune via AP, File)

On the southern shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake, more than 100 boats

are sitting high and dry in a parking lot, unable to sail the shallow, drought-stricken sea.

North of the nearly empty marina, salt-loving bacteria thriving in the low water has turned the liquid pink.

The massive lake, key to the state's economy and identity, is skirting record-low levels after years of below-average precipitation and record heat. A few dozen lawmakers took a road trip Thursday to see the problems firsthand and learn how they can help—besides praying for more rain and snow this winter.

The lake, about 75 miles long (120 kilometers) and 30 miles wide (50 kilometers), is America's largest outside the Great Lakes. Water levels have always fluctuated, but they have been dropping steadily since 2011.

"If this continues ... the ecosystem as a whole is under a pretty significant threat," said Jason Curry, a spokesman for Utah's Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands.

The state estimates that the Great Salt Lake's ecosystem has a \$1.32 billion economic effect. It is a home or major resting place for more than 250 species of birds. Salt and other minerals are mined from the lake and used for fertilizer, melting snow on roadways and other products. Its waters are credited with helping produce dry, powdery snow that attracts skiers worldwide to the nearby mountains.



In this Wednesday Jan. 21, 2015, file photo, a view from the shore of Antelope Island looking east toward the Wasatch Mountains shows mudflats that are usually submerged by water of the Great Salt Lake in Utah. More than 100 boats are sitting high and dry in a parking lot on the southern shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake, unable to sail the shallow, drought-stricken sea nearby. The massive lake, key to the Utah's economy and identity, is skirting record low levels after years of below-average participation and record heat. (Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune via AP, File)

It's generally three to five times saltier than the ocean, allowing swimmers to float easily. The lake is an unforgiving environment for most creatures, but a prime habitat for brine flies and brine shrimp—tiny, clear crustaceans once sold as "sea monkeys" in the back of comic books, whose eggs are harvested and sold worldwide as food for other shrimp, crab and fish.

As lake levels drop and the water becomes saltier, even those creatures are threatened.

"Brine shrimp are very resilient to salt but even they have a limit, and we're reaching that limit," said Don Leonard, CEO of the Great Salt Lake Brine Shrimp Cooperative, a group of companies that harvest and sell the eggs.

The low water levels stress the shrimp in a way that produces fewer eggs, Leonard said. Last year, the cooperative had a below-average harvest and had to pay to dredge its harbor just to get its boats on the water.



In this Feb 25, 2016, file photo, signs of the Great Salt Lake's low water level is evident at the Great Salt Lake Marina State Park in Utah. Sailboats were lifted by crane from the harbor and placed in the parking lot last Spring where they remain today. More than 100 boats are sitting high and dry in a parking lot on the southern shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake, unable to sail the shallow, drought-stricken sea nearby. The massive lake, key to the Utah's economy and identity, is skirting record low levels after years of below-average participation and record heat. (Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune via AP, File)

He declined to say how much it affected the industry but said dredging has become a yearly, expensive endeavor to dig out a deeper path for boats.

Lawmakers on Thursday took a quick tour of a storage area at a factory that harvests the eggs and visited a plant that extracts minerals from the lake.

Joe Havasi of Compass Minerals said the company had to extend its canals that pull brine from the water by about 2 miles because the shoreline has receded by 6 miles.

He said the company is eager for a planned breach of a railroad causeway later this year that's expected to allow some water from the southern half of the lake to flow north, where its operations are.



This Feb 25, 2016, file photo shows a sign at the Great Salt Lake Marina State Park in Utah. The lake has been steadily falling since 2012. The massive lake, key to the Utah's economy and identity, is skirting record low levels after years

of below-average precipitation and record heat. (Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune via AP, File)

Pouring rain caused lawmakers to scrap much of their tour, which will pick up Friday. Legislative staffer Ivan Djambov joked that it was the downpour they hoped for all summer.

"It's the wrong day for us, but we're grateful it's coming, right?" he said.

Last year, legislators approved spending \$1.5 million to dredge the lake, which will add an additional 6 to 8 feet (1.83 to 2.44 meters) and create a passable channel for boats. Officials said they hope to start that project early next year.

Republican state Rep. Mike McKell said lawmakers also will be looking at whether Utah should step up efforts to remove an invasive weed that sucks up tens of thousands of acre-feet of water every year.



This Feb 25, 2016, file photo shows boats at the Great Salt Lake Marina State Park in Utah. The massive lake, key to the Utah's economy and identity, is skirting record low levels after years of below-average precipitation and record heat. (Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune via AP, File)

Lynn de Freitas, executive director of the conservation group Friends of Great Salt Lake, said Utah needs to look at how major water pipeline projects may divert fresh water from rivers that normally flow into the lake.

"It's dire," she said. "We all have a stewardship responsibility for the lake and should honestly and actively own up to that."

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Citation: Beached boats, pink water as drought saps Great Salt Lake (2016, September 22)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-09-utah-drought-stricken-great-salt-lake.html>

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