

Boats left high and dry by drought back on Great Salt Lake

April 7 2017, by Michelle L. Price



A sailboat is hoisted into the Great Salt Lake Thursday, April 6, 2017, about 20 miles west of Salt Lake City. Dozens of beached sailboats that spent two years on the shore of Utah's drought-stricken Great Salt Lake were hoisted on cranes back into the briny waters after winter storms raised lake levels. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

Dozens of beached sailboats that spent two years on the shore of Utah's drought-stricken Great Salt Lake were hoisted on cranes back into the briny waters Thursday after winter storms raised lake levels.

"Mother Nature has been very kind to us," said Janet Robins, the commodore of the 140-year-old Great Salt Lake Yacht Club, comprised of the self-proclaimed "world's saltiest sailors."

Robins and other sailors watched and helped on the docks Thursday as sailboats, one at a time, were raised from their high and dry purgatory in the marina parking lot, carried across the sky on a crane and lowered into the water.

The Great Salt Lake, about 75 miles long (120 kilometers) and 30 miles wide (50 kilometers), is America's largest outside of the Great Lakes on the Canadian border and its waters are about three to five times saltier than the ocean. It's a harsh environment for most creatures outside of salt-loving brine shrimp, but the mineral-packed [lake](#) is a sailing haven.

The dense water isn't easily whipped up by wind, keeping it calm for sailboats gliding across.

"It's just like sailing across glass," Robins said.

The state-run marina, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) west of Utah's capital city, sits on the lake's southern shore and offers about 300 slips for boat owners to rent and park their boats.



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After an unusually high snowpack six years ago raised water levels 5 feet (1.5 meters), water levels dropped, skirting historic lows in recent years. Most of the 175 boats waiting ashore on trailers and cradles were removed the two years ago, when their keels had a tough time navigating the few feet of water at the mouth of the marina. Most stayed ashore because it's difficult to transport long sailboats, with their masts and extended keels, across Utah to other lakes, where sailors would contend with less-than-ideal waters, more drought and waiting lists for a space at the dock.

LeRoy Carter, who lives in the nearby city of Tooele, said the recent drought was the most serious he can remember in his 44 years of sailing the lake.

"We're subject to the whims of nature," Carter said as he took a break on the docks Thursday, helping to unload boats from the crane as they hit the water.

But then a wet winter raised [water levels](#) about 2 feet (60 centimeters), and 2017 is shaping up to be another high water year, according to Cory Angeroth, a hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. Angeroth said snow in the nearby mountains will melt through July, and that runoff will keep feeding the thirsty lake and raise the water level a few feet more.



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State officials estimate Utah missed out on collecting roughly \$450,000 in slip rental fees since 2015, Utah State Parks spokesman Eugene Swalberg said. The state this week started work on a \$1.5 million dredging project to remove silt buildup in the marina.

Dave Shearer, the harbor master at the marina, expected the crane crews, sailors and volunteers would be able to get 55 boats in Thursday, before wind or darkness ended the day's work. He hoped about 120 remaining boats on shore can be back on the [water](#) in the coming weeks.

"It's a big deal," Shearer said. "People are happy that we've had one hell of a good winter."



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A crew prepares to hoist a sailboat sitting in a marina parking lot at the Great Salt Lake Thursday, April 6, 2017, about 20 miles west of Salt Lake City. Dozens of beached sailboats that spent two years on the shore of Utah's drought-stricken Great Salt Lake were hoisted on cranes back into the briny waters after winter storms raised lake levels. Most of the 175 boats waiting ashore on trailers and cradles were removed two years ago, when their keels had a tough time navigating the few feet of water at the mouth of the marina. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)



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