

Extreme drought pushes portion of Utah's Great Salt Lake to lowest levels

July 28 2021, by Theresa Braine



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The southern portion of Great Salt Lake in Utah is at its lowest levels since recording began in 1847, as the state reels in extreme drought that doesn't seem poised to let up.

The U.S. Geological Survey said Saturday that water levels had dropped an inch beneath the previous record of 1963. Taking action to reverse

the declining situation is crucial, experts said.

"While the Great Salt Lake has been gradually declining for some time, current drought conditions have accelerated its fall to this new historic low," Utah Department of Natural Resources executive director Brian Steed said in a statement. "We must find ways to balance Utah's growth with maintaining a healthy lake. Ecological, environmental and economical balance can be found by working together as elected leaders, agencies, industry, stakeholders and citizens working together."

"Based on [current trends](#) and [historical data](#), the USGS anticipates water levels may decline an additional foot over the next several months," USGS Utah Water Science Center data chief Ryan Rowland said in the statement.

Moreover, the low recorded Friday is set to go even lower, Rowland told *The Salt Lake Tribune*.

"The new historic low is going to be set this autumn," he told the newspaper.

A reduced snowpack over the winter meant the lake started its spring season already depleted, Laura Vernon, Great Salt Lake coordinator for the Utah Department of Natural Resources, told the Tribune. Spring snowmelt usually sends the lake up 2 feet, or 3 to 4 feet "in an awesome year," she said. "This year, it only went up 6 inches. So it just never had a chance."

It's not only the snowpack that's wanting. Streams that feed the lake are also dwindling, with 77 of 122 stream gages (63%) showing at least 20 years of record reporting below-normal flows, the USGS said.

The reduced [water levels](#), which experts said are clearly linked to human-

induced climate change, could have far-reaching repercussions, experts said.

"As the lake continues to dry, it could result in [habitat loss](#), reduced snow, reduced [lake](#) access, increased dust, which could worsen our air quality, increased salinity—there are a lot of far-reaching consequences," Candice Hasenyager, deputy director of the Utah Division of Water Resources, told NBC News. "It's already concerning that Great Salt Lake has been on a slow decline, but the drought has accelerated that decline. It's really alarming."

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Citation: Extreme drought pushes portion of Utah's Great Salt Lake to lowest levels (2021, July 28) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-07-extreme-drought-portion-utah-great.html>

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