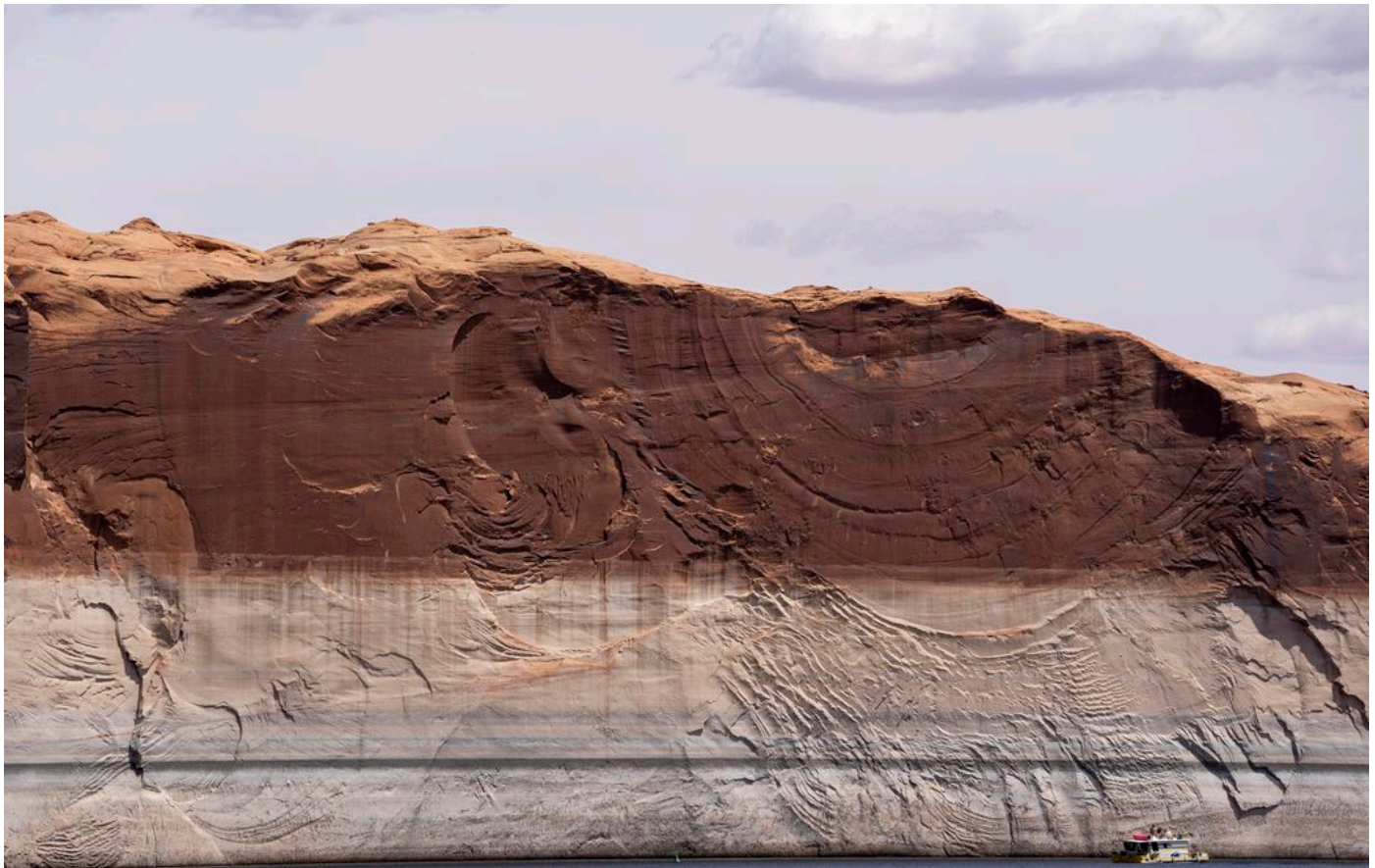


Lake Powell level about to hit a historic low as West's water crisis deepens

Forecasts indicate power generation at Glen Canyon may be in trouble next year



Lake Powell will soon hit [its lowest level](#) since [Glen Canyon Dam](#) started trapping the Colorado River's water in 1963 — even with emergency releases of water from reservoirs upstream.

The Bureau of Reclamation announced Thursday that the lake elevation will soon drop below 3,555.1 feet above sea level, the record set in 2005, back

near the start of a 20-year dry cycle plaguing the Colorado River Basin.

"Lake Powell's elevation is expected to drop another two feet by the end of July, and will likely continue to decline until next year's spring runoff into the Colorado River begins," the bureau said in a news release.

The level has dropped 145 vertical feet since 1999, when the lake was full. Since then, Lake Powell — straddling the Utah-Arizona border — has lost about 16 million acre-feet and is just 33% full. On Thursday, [the elevation was 3,555.55 feet](#), less than 6 inches above the record low.

The increasingly dire situations at Lake Powell and its downstream partner Lake Mead illustrate the stress on the Colorado River system, which supplies water to about 35 million people, irrigates 5 million acres and generates 5 billion of kilowatt-hours of electricity. Several years of drought and a warming climate have drastically decreased flows on the Colorado River, and this year's record heat and low precipitation is helping drive the system toward the brink.

(Rick Egan | The Salt Lake Tribune) Abandoned bouy's that used to protect the "Three Roof Ruin" from boaters during high water, sit at the bottom of the Escalante River, in Glen Canyon, on Monday, May 17, 2021.

Meanwhile, various projects remain on the drawing board in Utah and other Upper Colorado River Basin states that would divert even more water from the Colorado. Utah, for example, is fully committed to its \$1.5 billion Lake Powell pipeline proposal, which would move 86,000 acre-feet a year to Washington and Kane counties, and has recently established the Colorado River Authority of Utah to advanced the Beehive State's claims to the river.

Last week, the [Bureau of Reclamation](#) authorized the release of 181,000 acre-feet over the next five months at three reservoirs, mostly from Flaming

Gorge Dam on the Green River. Conservationists like John Weisheit of Living Rivers say that move is merely buying time, forestalling the day when Lake Powell will no longer function as a reservoir.

"Emptying the upstream reservoirs is ... like burning your furniture to stay warm," said Weisheit, paraphrasing a famous quote from Aldo Leopold's "A Sand County Almanac." "It's an act of desperation. ... Everything is breaking. We have exceeded the limits of nature."

Originally an afterthought, recreation has become Lake Powell's most important and visible role for many Westerners who explore the 185-mile lake by boat to play, camp and fish. Now most of the [Glen Canyon National Recreation Area](#)'s boat ramps are either unusable or difficult to use, and the marinas could become inoperable.

On Monday, the National Park Service closed the lake's Dangling Rope Marina, the only place to get fuel in the 100-miles stretch between Wahweap and Bullfrog, at least through the end of the year. Houseboats can no longer be launched at Wahweap, although they still can be retrieved for now.

Also of immediate concern is preserving [Glen Canyon Dam](#)'s ability to produce hydropower, which is not possible if the lake's elevation dips below 3,490 feet above sea level, a level known as "minimum power pool." However, the bureau has established a 35-foot buffer in an effort to avoid damaging the dam's turbines, which are liable to entrain air bubbles if the level goes below 3,525 — or 30 feet lower than Friday's level. Forecasts indicate the lake elevation will likely breach that threshold sometime next year.

Built into the 710-foot-tall dam are eight hydroelectric generators, whose total capacity is 1,320 megawatts. Annually, this power station produces 5 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity, which is distributed by the [Western Area](#)

[Power Administration](#) to Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and Nebraska, according to the bureau.

Revenues from these sales support endangered fish recover and salinity control programs on the Colorado and its tributaries.

As Lake Powell's water level declines, the U.S. Geological Survey is anticipating a similar record being broken at the Great Salt Lake. Utah's famed terminal lake has been flirting with dropping below 4,191.3 feet above sea level — the record low set in 1963 — for the last couple weeks, and [USGS measuring stations](#) have seen the lake dip below that level for brief periods. The USGS, however, only counts it if the daily average level drops below the record, which experts expect to see in the next few weeks.

This week, [the U.S. Drought Monitor](#) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln [reported that virtually the entire state of Utah](#) — all but 0.06% — is now in either "extreme" or "exceptional" drought. As of Tuesday, the monitor said 69.69% of the state is in the most serious category (exceptional); 30.25% is in the second-worst category (extreme); and 0.06% is in the severe drought category, the third-worst.