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Lake Powell On Upward Trend



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Lake Powell on upward trend despite extra water released for Lake Mead

Page, Ariz. – Runoff on the Colorado River this past week has pushed Lake Powell to its highest level in four years. When the runoff ends in early July, the lake will be near 3,620 feet above mean sea level (msl).

Even though runoff in 2016 was slightly below normal it was enough to boost Lake Powell 30 feet from the spring low in April. By July, the lake level will be 65 feet higher than April 2005 when the lake dropped 145 feet below full pool.

As sure as winter snows give way to spring runoff each year to replenish our rivers, lakes and waterways, Lake Powell naysayers have flooded the opinion pages of newspapers with drain-the-lake propaganda. The reality is that Lake Powell has continued to hold its own for over a decade now and continues on a quiet upward trend toward the lake's normal 50-year elevation of 3640 feet msl.

"Some good news is that despite 15 years of drought, Lake Powell is storing more than 4.3 trillion gallons of water and the reservoirs above Lake Powell in the Upper Colorado River Basin have filled to near 90 percent of capacity," said Tiff Mapel, Friends of Lake Powell spokesperson.

The Colorado River is divided between an Upper Basin that includes Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and parts of Arizona and a Lower Basin of California, Arizona, Nevada and parts of Utah.

In accordance with Colorado River Law and coordinated objectives between the two basins, Lake Powell normally releases a minimum of 8.23 million acre-feet downstream to Lake Mead each water year (October 1 to September 30). However, that number can fluctuate. In the past two years, Lake Powell has delivered 9 million acre-feet downstream to Mead as part of the Colorado River's Interim Guidelines for Lower Basin shortages and coordinated operations which were established in 2005. An acre-foot of water is 325,000 gallons and 9 million acre-feet is 2.9 trillion gallons.

"The silent but important statistic is that Lake Powell has provided extra water to Mead in five of the past 10 years, including the giant release of 12.5 maf in 2011," Mapel said.

These increased flows have pushed the 10-year rolling average of Upper Basin deliveries to 89.4 maf – significantly more than the obligated base flow of 82.3 maf. The difference is almost an extra year's worth of water.

If Lake Powell is rising, why does Lake Mead continue to drop?

Eric Kuhn, general manager of the Colorado River Water Conservation District, recently reported the problem is that Lake Mead continues to operate with a water budget deficit of up to 1.2 million acre-feet per year.

This deficit exists because of water delivery inefficiencies and evaporation in the Lower Basin. Lake Mead releases more water downstream than is actually allocated to California, Arizona and Nevada because of timing and other delivery inefficiencies. In addition, Lake Mead and the other downstream lakes, located in the hot Mojave Desert where temperatures can soar to 120 degrees, experience an evaporation rate that can exceed 0.6 million acre-feet per year. Together, these operating losses result in a water deficit for the Lower Basin that approaches 1.2 million acre-feet per year.

To make up for this water budget deficit, the Lower Basin has traditionally relied on wet hydrological events in the Rocky Mountains to periodically fill and then overflow the Upper Basin reservoirs sending additional water cascading all the way down to Lake Mead. This occurred in the mid-1980s and then again in the late-1990s which helped to replenish the Lower Basin system of reservoirs.

Today as Lake Mead continues to drop, the Upper Basin is doing its fair share to increase water deliveries downstream in accordance with existing reservoir-operating criteria between the two basins. However, the additional deliveries by the Upper Basin have largely been lost in the negative media stories about the Colorado River and the ongoing drought.

“The real concern of the Colorado River is the failure of the Lower Basin to account for its system delivery losses and the continued reliance of overflowing water deliveries by the Upper Basin during times of hydrologic plenty,” Mapel explained. “With economic stakes high, it is a risky gamble and a choice not considered sustainable in light of ongoing drought conditions.”

Droughts do tend to go in cycles. The multi-year Texas drought turned to flooding conditions in 2016. The fickle nature of the Colorado River and the need to store water in reservoirs during periodic wet periods was not lost on our forefathers. When there is abundant rainfall and the reservoirs are full, the infrastructure on the Colorado River may seem redundant but water managers rely on this stored water to make up the difference when the heavens don't cooperate.

"Lake Powell is doing exactly what it was intended and designed to do," said Marlon Duke, spokesperson for the Bureau of Reclamation's Upper Colorado Region. "It is storing water for Upper Basin states and helping ensure the Upper Basin can meet its obligation deliveries to the Lower Basin without curtailing entitled use by Upper Basin water users."

In the late 1990s, when Lake Powell and Lake Mead were both full to near capacity, environmental groups hoping to drain Lake Powell floated the notion that two large reservoirs on the Colorado River were redundant and unnecessary. They considered Lake Mead large enough to withstand a severe drought. They also claimed that keeping Lake Powell full could result in a catastrophic dam failure with significant loss of life and property downstream.

In retrospect, it was simply another self-serving attempt to drain Lake Powell and restore Glen Canyon.

“When the climate tables turned in the year 2000, the folly of this proposal became apparent,” Mapel said. “Thank goodness we had Lake Powell. Simply put, Lake Powell is a critical asset. It has kept Lake Mead from running empty and it also provides important regional recreational resources.”

The notion to drain Lake Powell is a shallow idea that ignores important economic, political and resource consequences. According to officials at the Bureau of Reclamation, the loss of hydropower from Glen Canyon Dam would have a major negative impact to the western power grid and compromised rural electric rates. The revenue loss for the Upper Basin would, undermine repayment schedules for irrigation projects in the Upper Basin and reduce funding for salinity control efforts, improvements to aging irrigation systems and jeopardize existing endangered fish recovery programs.

Additionally, draining Lake Powell would destroy a thriving and important regional economic engine. Arguably the most scenic lake in America, Lake Powell attracts millions of people each year to its inviting waters, the scenic landscape, comfortable Colorado Plateau temperatures and an unbounded sense of adventure. Lake Powell is a world class experience that offers a multitude of experiences including recreational boating, exploration of 96 lush and scenic canyons, wakeboarding, kayaking, camping, photography and outstanding fishing opportunities whether on the lake or the downstream cold water, blue-ribbon trout fishery at Lees Ferry.

Lake Powell is managed by the National Park Service as part of the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. It's a diverse recreational landscape with more acres than Grand Canyon National Park. In celebration of the 100th birthday of the National Park Service in 2016, the “Find Your Park” initiative is promoting visitation at special places like Lake Powell.

The water is up. Come see for yourself just how fabulous a Lake Powell vacation can be. Take a boat tour to Rainbow Bridge National Monument, hike one of the scenic side canyons, find your own play beach and experience the Milky Way in a dark sky exploding with stars. Fish for trophy striped bass or rent a houseboat. Lake Powell is your adventure opportunity and it can make for family memories that last a lifetime.

For more information, visit the Friends of Lake Powell on Facebook or at lakepowell.org.

The Friends of Lake Powell is a 501.c.3 organization whose mission is the preservation, protection and promotion of Lake Powell.