

Marinas in jeopardy as Great Salt Lake continues to dry up

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Leia Larsen

Four boats await moving at the Great Salt Lake Marina on March 1, 2015. According to park officials, around 90 boats have been pulled from the marina in the past year as water levels drop.

Navigating a 54-foot yacht through the Great Salt Lake Marina's (<http://www.gslmarina.com/>) tight harbor takes finesse. It doesn't help that a drought-induced dropping lake and years of accumulating sediment last March meant only about three feet of water was left in the harbor. But Dave Ghizzone, owner of Gonzo Boat Tours and Rentals (<http://utah.com/gonzo-boat-rentals-and-tours>), knows the marina well. Even when his propellers churned up sand and turned the water murky, he remained unfazed.



(<http://www.standard.net/Great-Salt-Lake>)

“You can see what we’re up against here,” he said, motioning toward the narrow rocky banks at the marina’s mouth. “We have a very small margin of error we have to hit pretty much perfectly every time, and if we miss it, we’ll hit a prop.”

As his retrofitted dinner yacht, christened “Sunset,” moved from the tortuous, shallow marina to calm, open water, Ghizzone spoke of a lake worth the struggle.

Editor’s note: This is an edited and updated version of a story originally published on March 4, 2015.

“This is the most unique lake on Earth, it really is,” he said. “We call it ‘the sickness.’ Once it gets in your blood, you’re hooked.”

Even with the allure of its waters, prolonged drought and the capriciousness of the Great Salt Lake have caused a flood of anxiety among boaters and boat business owners like Ghizzone.

Utah State Parks (<http://stateparks.utah.gov/>) manages marinas at Great Salt Lake State Park (<http://stateparks.utah.gov/parks/dead-horse/map/>) and on Antelope Island (<http://stateparks.utah.gov/parks/antelope-island/>). Even in a good water year, those are the only two major boat access points on the entire 75-mile lake. But the lake is now so low that the Antelope Island one has dried up and closed. Most of the boats that dock at the Great Salt Lake are beached in the parking lot or storage units. The water is so shallow they would topple over as the keels hit the lakebed.

But when it came time for the Legislature to allocate \$1.5 million this year to dredge the State Park marinas to keep them open, lawmakers nearly left Great Salt Lake boaters high and dry. All the funds were instead funneled to the marina at Utah Lake State Park. (<http://www.standard.net/Recreation/2015/03/04/Park-director-to-boaters-Get-out-early-and-often>)

The news came as a blow to Ghizzone. He rented kayaks, motorboats, paddleboards and pedal boats at Antelope Island before its marina dried up. His business now completely depends on rentals and dinner cruise tours out of the Great Salt Lake Marina. Along with a sailing rental business, Sailing Solutions, he’s one of only two concessionaires operating on the Great Salt Lake. Neither was consulted in the state’s decision, Ghizzone said, but they need the marina dredged to stay in business.

According to Utah State Park information, Utah Lake State Park was last dredged in 2003. The mouth of the Great Salt Lake Marina was dredged in 2008, but the marina itself hasn't been dredged since 1979 or 1980.

"I've been dealing with a lot of depressed slip renters trying to figure out where they're going to go, how they're going to get out, where they're going to store, or if they're going to California and just give up," said Dave Shearer, harbormaster at the Great Salt Lake Marina. "The water situation we're having now is just devastating to this community."

Sailors and business owners sent several letters to state lawmakers and raised hell through the media. At the eleventh hour, the state Legislator scraped another \$1.5 million to dredge the Great Salt Lake Marina just before the ending of the 2015 session. That was last spring, but the marina's boats remain stranded. With all the designing, engineering, wetlands scoping and project bidding, dredging won't happen until at least this winter.

In the meantime, the [Great Salt Lake Marina will store beached boats](http://www.standard.net/News/2015/04/24/Boats-removed-from-Great-Salt-Lake-for-dredging-project) (<http://www.standard.net/News/2015/04/24/Boats-removed-from-Great-Salt-Lake-for-dredging-project>) for free and Utah State Parks loses revenue.

Great Salt Lake Marina has 320 rentable slips total. Boaters at the Great Salt Lake typically rent slips and sail year-round because its waters don't freeze. Renting a slip costs about \$1,500 a year, and those funds are the primary source of the park's revenue.

The Great Salt Lake State Park receives between 250,000 and 300,000 visitors annually. About half those are slip renters, according to Jeremy Shaw, the park's ranger.

"We're going to accommodate those boats the very best we can, whether keeping them in slips or keeping them in dry storage at the park, we'll do everything possible to accommodate our boaters," Shaw said in March. "But long-term, we're going to see a pretty good reduction in revenue."

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[Explore the project](http://www.standard.net/Great-Salt-Lake) (<http://www.standard.net/Great-Salt-Lake>)

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