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Changing Levels at Ariz. Lakes Costly

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TUCSON, Ariz. -- Drought caused the water levels at Lake Powell and Lake Mead to plunge, forcing the federal government to shell out millions to compensate for the losses.

The National Park Service has spent about \$20 million to alter utilities, ramps, sewage facilities and other infrastructure on the lakes during three years of declining water levels. One concessionaire shelled out about \$2 million to move a massive marina 12 miles.

The drought finally eased this year, but Lake Mead is shallower and smaller.

"Whenever we lose a foot in elevation, we can lose between 3 and 10 feet horizontally," said Gary Warshefski, deputy superintendent at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

At times in the spring of 2002, Warshefski said, the lake lost a foot a week, "significant and costly to try to mitigate"

The drop played havoc with several of the lake's eight boat launch ramps. It forced the Park Service to experiment with concrete planks and corrugated metal extensions to try to keep them open.

At the Boulder Beach area, permanent public restrooms are near shore when the lake is at capacity; now, people must walk at least a half mile to reach them, he said.

The lower water level and resulting white line on surrounding cliffs, like a bathtub ring, tended to discourage visits.

Lake Powell also suffered before it rose more than 50 feet this year because of a wet winter. The plunging water levels affected power, sewer and water lines for the facilities at the lake's four marinas.

"When the water goes down, marinas have to be pushed out to buoy fields, and they have to be repositioned," said Marianne Karraker, acting public information officer for the lake. And when water levels return, everything needs to move again.

Lake Powell has spent nearly \$8 million since 2002 to ensure access to the lake. Last week, the lake reached an elevation of 3,605 feet _ 95 feet below capacity, Karraker said.

Federal officials aren't the only ones that have had to shell out big money to keep access to the lake waters.

Gail and John Kaiser spent \$2 million in 2002 to move their 635-slip marina on Lake Mead from Las Vegas Bay to Hemenway Bay, with some 500 boats still in their slips. Her family has run the marina, which includes fuel docks, a store, pumpout stations and a restaurant, since 1957.

For now, federal officials and concessionaires say they are pleased that winter precipitation has helped reverse the falling water trend. But Warshefski said Lake Mead could still go lower, meaning the loss of more access points.

Calville Bay will likely become a problem if water levels go lower, he said.

"It's going to become a cliff," he said, "and you can't launch a boat from a cliff."

On the Net:

Lake Mead National Recreation Area: <http://www.nps.gov/lame/>

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area: <http://www.nps.gov/glca/>