

Plan to dredge Lake Powell shortcut draws opposition

By TODD GLASENAPP
Sun Correspondent
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PAGE -- A group advocating the draining of Lake Powell is calling on members to oppose a plan that would deepen a popular shortcut for boaters.

Glen Canyon Institute president Richard Ingebretsen encouraged organization members Tuesday to register their opposition to a plan aimed at dredging the Castle Rock Cut by 15 feet.

Drought conditions have left the cut dry since 2003.

On the GCI Web site, Ingebretsen called the idea a "large and disruptive project," and asked GCI members and friends to send comments to the National Park Service to opt for the no-action alternative. The deadline for receiving comments on the environmental assessment is 11:59 p.m. Tuesday.

"Glen Canyon Institute believes that the scope and potential impact on the project requires a full environmental impact statement (EIS) instead of a simple EA," wrote Ingebretsen, of Salt Lake City. "This proposal is a perfect illustration of why GCI is working to upgrade Glen Canyon National Recreation Area to a National Park, giving the area the full protection it needs."

Last Monday, Page City Council directed Mayor Bill Justice to send a letter in support of deepening the cut for the third time. The last dredging was in 1992.

BOATERS VS. NON-BOATERS?

Page-based Friends of Lake Powell also is asking people to offer comments. Spokesman Steven Ward advocates the deepening proposal.

"The number of people who understand the water issues in the Southwest and the number of people who enjoy recreating on the lakes in the Colorado

River chain is a much higher number than the membership rolls of radical environmental groups such as Glen Canyon Institute," Ward said Wednesday.

"I hope those people that enjoy Lake Powell and understand its value will make their feelings known on the issue of deepening Castle Rock Cut," said Ward, a longtime Page resident. With the cut closed, boaters have had to travel an extra 12 miles, logging more than an hour of time, to reach uplake destinations from the lower end of the lake.

But environmental concerns have prompted Ingebretsen to call for leaving the cut as is.

"The proposed project would permanently damage Glen Canyon National Recreation Area for the convenience of one group of recreationists, boaters using Lake Powell reservoir," Ingebretsen wrote.

Ingebretsen's involvement with the nation's second-largest reservoir was stepped up more than a decade ago, when GCI joined forces with groups calling for draining Lake Powell. The Sierra Club's board of directors passed a resolution to that effect in 1996.

GCI wants Congress to decommission Glen Canyon Dam and permit the Colorado River to run freely through Glen Canyon again. Dam construction flooded the canyon in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

VISITATION FALLOFF, DEGRADATION CITED

Ingebretsen made six points in his e-mailing to GCI members.

"It is not needed, since the number of boaters is decreasing, and an alternative route is available," he wrote. "Castle Rock Cut will likely be unusable once again as Lake Powell reservoir continues to decline."

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area entrance stations do not separate boaters in their monthly counts. But statistics show visitation has dropped since a peak of an estimated 3.5 million people in 1992-93. In 2006, 1.8 million visitors were counted.

Recreation area spokesman Kevin Schneider said national park units around the country are seeing fewer visitors, not just Glen Canyon. He attributed the local drop partly to false media-driven characterizations that Lake Powell is empty.

"One also needs to consider the issues with tourism across the nation after Sept 11, and the downturn in the economy that followed," Schneider said. "I believe a downturn in economic conditions would especially affect boaters."

The Bureau of Reclamation reported earlier this month that unregulated inflow into Lake Powell in October was 85 percent of average. The lake is expected to make an expected seasonal drop by Jan. 1 to 3,595 feet above sea level, 105 feet below full pool. Before the drought began eight years ago, the lake was essentially full at the late June peak. This year the lake peaked at 3,611 feet.

Ingebretsen also said the excavation of 250,000 cubic yards of sediment and sandstone would cause ecological damage, pollution, and emission of CO₂, contributing to global warming.

"The project would degrade scenic and recreational values by leaving an artificial channel and huge rubble pile," he wrote. "It would take significant amounts of taxpayer dollars away from other high priorities, such as restoration and protection of the backcountry."

Schneider said funding would likely come from revenues generated by its contract with concessioner ARAMARK.

"We don't have any estimates on cost yet -- that would depend on what exactly is proposed by the environmental assessment," Schneider said. "The alternatives in the environmental assessment will provide more detail about exactly how it might be deepened, how deep, how wide, how long, etc. The environmental assessment should be out later this winter.

Ingebretsen also wrote that the proposal violates the park service mandate to leave parks "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations," Ingebretsen wrote.

Daily Sun correspondent Todd Glasenapp can be reached at dtglasenapp@Route89.com.

WEIGH IN To make comments, people may write to: Castle Rock Cut EA, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, P.O. Box 1507, Page, AZ 86040, or use the recreation area Web site at www.parkplanning.nps.gov/glca.