Lake Powell down, scenery up

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BULLFROG, Utah (AP) — Lake Powell is barely half full and taking a quarter less runoff than expected this year — a sign the Colorado River basin remains in the grip of a multiyear drought, according to a new report from government hydrologists.

For some, Lake Powell is proving its value, keeping water for dry years. Others say the reservoir may never refill and should be drained to reveal the glory of Glen Canyon.

The effects of low water are everywhere, from the bathtub rings on canyon walls to Hite Marina, left high and dry and shut down in 2003. Here at Bullfrog, the boat launch appears to be taking on the length of an airport runway — a tilting concrete slab 1,568 feet long. It had to be extended twice, in 2003 and 2004, for a combined 660 feet. The launch will go out of business if the water drops another 29 feet, officials say.

Another consequence of the shrinking waters is that it can take boaters longer distances to navigate the sinewy reservoir.

The usual shortcuts are no longer reliable or safe, forcing more traffic in deeper channels, where wakes produced by large vessels can sink smaller boats — it happened to four boats within two hours on the Fourth of July in the "Maytag washing machine" of one channel where waves bounce off canyon walls, said Uplake District Ranger Steve Luckusen of the National Park Service.

For now, what boaters lose in watery expanse they gain in exposed canyons and sandbars.

"Scenery-wise, it's better, and you have more beaches for camping," said Terry Bell, an interpretive ranger for the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

Whether Lake Powell is shrinking to the point it may never recover could be apparent only in hindsight. It's difficult for experts to project even seasonal fluctuations for the largest reservoir on

the Colorado River basin, which is a source of water for 25 million people and irrigation for millions of acres from Colorado to California.

In April, for instance, a sufficient Rocky Mountain snowpack led hydrologists to believe Lake Powell would get an average year's supply of fresh water.

It didn't happen: A warm spring and dry winds vaporized much of the runoff. By June, hydrologists were revising their forecasts.

"It is now almost a certainty that inflow to Lake Powell will be below average in 2006," wrote Christopher Cutler, a Bureau of Reclamation hydraulic engineer, in a lengthy report filed Friday for government officials at dozens of federal and state agencies.

Cutler projected that the 2006 water year, which started Oct. 1, would send Lake Powell only 73% of average runoff. That's more than any of the punishing drought years of 2000-04, but it could signal another turn for the worse.

A year ago, Lake Powell was showing promise of recovery. Now hydrologists say 2005 looks like a fleeting break from the "extreme" drought that first took hold in September 1999 and started siphoning away Lake Powell's then 97-percent full reservoir.

"The drought in the Colorado River Basin may not be over," says Cutler's report, obtained by The Associated Press. "Historical droughts show that it is common to have one or two above-average years during sustained multiyear droughts."

Lake Powell is 52% full, he reported.

"In the broader contuxt, the lake wqs0intended all along to fluctuate and essentially be like a bank account for water storage for the West," said Kevin Schneider, a spokesman for the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. "It's functioning just as it was intended."

That's the "party line" from government officials, "but behind the scenes they are frantic," said Richard Ingebretsen, the founder of Glen Canyon Institute, who believes Lake Powell eventually will drain itself, helped by global warming and overuse. It's 430 feet at its deepest right now, right behind Glen Canyon dam, where it could take 520 feet of water.

"I'd bet all the money I have that Lake Powell will be a muddy pool in five years," said Ingebretsen, a University of Utah physics professor who noted two good winters "couldn't make a dent filling this big reservoir" with snowmelt. "There's just not enough water to refill it. You can only store surplus water, and there's no surplus to store."