

Shrinking lake Limit GSL commercial uses

Tribune Editorial

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The Great Salt Lake is shrinking, taking vital wetlands with it. While the lake level historically rises and falls dramatically, warming temperatures and dwindling snowpack could mean a permanently smaller lake. If that happens, millions of birds and other wildlife could lose vital food, shelter and nesting areas.

The average lake level is 4,200 feet above sea level. The lake now stands at 4,196.5 feet; its lowest level was 4,191.35 feet in 1963. Then the lake covered only 950 square miles, a dramatic drop from its average of about 1,700 square miles.

The lake is fed by rivers and streams that get their water from mountain snowfall to the east of Salt Lake Valley. The in-flowing fresh water creates marshlands around the east and north shores of the lake, and, as the lake level drops, the wetlands that support millions of birds begin to dry up.

Groups that study and monitor the lake and its migratory bird habitat, one of the largest in the Western Hemisphere, are concerned that climate change and the expanding population of Utah with its growing need for space and water will continue to impact the lake. Commercial and residential developments have already crowded the precious wildlife habitat. Water levels in some marinas are so shallow that rescue craft are having difficulty reaching boaters who are in trouble.

It's a valid concern. But what can be done?

Aside from taking steps to lessen the effects of climate change, an effort that must be undertaken globally as well as locally, Utah government agencies can act quickly to protect what resources are available to keep the lake viable for recreation, commercial interests and wildlife.

For starters, the state should deny requests from Great Salt Lake Minerals Corp. to take 353,000 acre feet more water from the lake each year to increase its mineral production. That large a draw-down would lower the lake by about 2 feet. Combined with other factors, it could spell disaster for the lake's ecosystems.

As Salt Lake City plans for a fourth runway, the airport board should consider locating it so its potential effect on the lake and wetlands is mitigated as much as possible.

Besides limiting further commercial encroachment on the lake, some advocates suggest assigning the lake its own water rights, meaning some water flow into the lake would be protected. While we're not ready to support that idea yet, we believe it deserves further study.