China drought renews debate over Three Gorges Dam

By ELAINE KURTNBACH, Associated Press
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XINGZI, China (AP) — Tao Jingun’s graceful wooden fishing boat sits atop a vast, shell-studded basin that was the bottom of Poyang Lake just months ago but now is a dry ocean of green grass because of China’s worst drought in decades.

As Poyang shrinks to a tenth its usual size, crops wither and millions of people go thirsty, critics point to the gargantuan Three Gorges Dam as one cause, making it a symbol of the risks of the country’s penchant for extreme engineering projects dating back to the Great Wall of China.

"This is the least water I’ve seen in over 30 years. There’s nothing we can do," said Tao, a thin, congenial man who usually makes up to about $6,000 selling his annual catch from Poyang but this year expects to earn "basically nothing."

"I hope the government will let some more water out of the Three Gorges. If some water comes we can at least do a little work," said Tao, whose crayfish traps and nets are stashed in his village farmhouse.

Many villagers and some scientists suspect the dam not only withholds water from the Yangtze River downstream, but could also be altering weather patterns, contributing to the lowest rainfall some areas have seen in a half-century or more.

The government denies that Three Gorges can cause droughts but has acknowledged some of its environmental problems in a debate that highlights China’s reliance on such showcase projects to sustain its economic boom.

The Three Gorges Dam is the world’s biggest hydroelectric plant, completed in 2006 as a way to control flooding along the Yangtze and generate massive power for the country’s ravenous industries.

The government already has used up 80 percent of the reserves in the 410-mile-long (660-kilometer-long) reservoir by releasing extra water to relieve drought conditions downstream.

Still, the Yangtze’s levels have fallen enough to threaten shipping both upstream and downstream as far as Shanghai, where high salt tides threaten drinking water supplies for its 23 million residents.

Rolling blackouts worsened by waning hydroelectric capacity are expected to deepen in the hottest days of summer. As farmers abandon their dried ponds and fields, prices for food are surging, defying Beijing’s efforts to bring down already stubbornly high inflation.

"Things changed after the Three Gorges," said Fan Guofeng, who has spent 30 of his 46 years living beside the Yangtze in the city of Jiujiang.