



US Army Corps
of Engineers
Mobile District

News Release

Release No. 07-27

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For Immediate Release:
May 11, 2007

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News Release: www.sam.usace.army.mil/pa/

Corps continues to monitor water levels at West Point Lake

Mobile, Ala. – The drought that is affecting the Southeast has left West Point Lake lower than normal for this time of year. Dry conditions are projected to continue for the foreseeable future. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the reservoir, it is unlikely to reach its full pool level this summer unless weather patterns change significantly.

“Normally, the water flow from late winter and early spring rains raises the impoundment to the summer pool level of 635’ above mean sea level (msl). Conditions have been unusually dry, however, and the reservoir level is nearly three feet below normal for this time of year. During April the reservoir received 28 percent of its historical inflow for that timeframe,” said Patrick Robbins, chief, public affairs. The corps has developed action zones (see sidebar 1), based on past operations, to cover events such as droughts in order to manage the demands on the water in the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) basin. The reservoir is currently operating in Action Zone 2.”

The lack of rainfall will have a greater effect on the reservoir in summer. The current level, 632.2’ msl, has remained relatively constant over the last month. As the summer approaches, the demands for water uses will increase, and the water level in the reservoir will decline. When this happens, West Point Project Management personnel will implement the Plan for Low Water Levels (see sidebar 2). This plan explains the conditions that affect recreation and actions that will be taken to address them.

“West Point Dam and Lake is a multipurpose reservoir, and the corps has to manage the Project to balance demands for hydropower, navigation, fish and wildlife management, water quality, and recreation,” Robbins said. “The first effect from the lower pool will be felt by the recreation community.”

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2-2-2-2 Corps monitors West Point water level

One of the first things visitors will notice when the reservoir approaches Action Zone 2, is the low water level in designated swimming areas around the reservoir. Normally, these swimming areas are 6-7 feet in depth, at the deepest point. But at this level, the deepest point within the buoy line around the area is less than 2-3 feet in depth.

“The cool lake water looks inviting to swimmers; however, it is much riskier to swim outside the designated areas,” Robbins said. “The swimming beaches are graded and groomed to have an even, gradually sloped surface that extends outward into the lake. There are no sudden, deep drop-offs or submerged obstacles within the designated areas, whereas some hazards may be present in places that have not been designed and constructed to accommodate swimmers.”

Most of the boat ramps around the reservoir are expected to remain open and usable throughout the recreation season. Boaters can continue to enjoy the center, or main channels of the reservoir, but should exercise caution when boating near the shoreline, and they should also be sure to wear their life jackets. “Wearing a life jacket can save your life,” Robbins said. “It is an essential precaution boaters should take whenever they are enjoying the water.”

The action zones and lake level can be found on the web at <http://water.sam.usace.army.mil>. The lake level is updated daily.

SIDEBARS FOR ACTION ZONE INFORMATION AND PLAN FOR LOW WATER LEVELS.

SIDEBAR 1 -- Action Zones

What the public needs to know about the action zones for West Point Lake

West Point Project has an important role in the mission to manage resources for hydropower, flood control, recreation, water quality, fish and wildlife as well as support to navigation. Mobile District has developed Action Zones to ensure the project can meet its mission on the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River basin.

Zone 1 indicates that releases can be made to support seasonal navigation (when the channel has been adequately maintained), hydropower releases and water quality releases. If the all corps lakes on the ACF system are in Zone 1 or above, the river system would operate in a fairly normal manner. Water levels in designated swimming areas are 2-3 feet at the deepest point vice the usual 6-7 feet depth. Boat launching ramps are not affected.

Zone 2 indicates that water to support seasonal navigation may be limited. Hydropower generation is supported at a reduced level. Water supply and water quality releases are met. Minimum flow targets are met. Designated swim areas become unusable. Boat launching ramps remain usable but may require silt removal on a periodic basis. Lake users are reminded to use caution when operating near the shoreline and to be aware of potential submerged obstacles.

Zone 3 indicates that water to support seasonal navigation may be significantly limited. Hydropower generation is supported at a reduced level. Water quality releases and minimum flow targets are met. Designated swim remain unusable. Boat ramps remain open. News releases are issued to stress the need for caution when boating in areas near the shoreline and to be aware of potential submerged obstacles.

Zone 4 indicates that navigation is not supported. Hydropower demands will be met at minimum level. Water quality releases and minimum flow targets are met. Designated swim areas remain unusable. The boat ramps remain.

SIDEBAR 2 -- Plan for Low Water Levels at West Point

West Point Project Management personnel will implement the Plan for Low Water Levels as the pool elevation decreases. The plan identifies adverse conditions and the actions as the low water level affects recreation.

For example, at pool elevation or lake level of 632.5 feet above mean sea level (msl), designated swimming areas are marginally usable. Marina operators should prepare to move floating docks to deeper water. Boaters need to be aware of submerged hazards such as unmarked shoals. An estimated 35 percent of the private docks around the reservoir may become marginally usable. Caution signs are posted at swimming areas alerting visitors to the shallow depths and potential hazards. The corps will advise marina operators and other lessees of the water level forecast, monitor boating channels for hazards, and issue news releases advising the public of the water level forecast. Park rangers will monitor boat launch ramp conditions and inspect the reservoir for obvious hazards.

If the lake level drops to 629 feet msl, all swim areas are unusable, marina operators must shift boat docks to keep them from becoming grounded. An estimated 40-50 percent of the private docks become unusable and unmarked boating hazards may emerge. Some areas could become unsafe for skiing; and approximately 10 percent of the boat launch ramps will have less than 6 feet of water on the end of the concrete surface. About 30 percent of the courtesy docks at boat launching ramps will be unusable. Project management personnel will continue all measures identified above.

At reservoir levels near 627 feet msl, or some eight feet below the full pool level, conditions worsen significantly, severely restricting water-related recreation activities. Much of the shoreline access is limited by mud; navigation hazards will continue to emerge, and skiing will be limited to main reservoir. Local marinas, bait and tackle shops and water-related business may see a drop in business and some boat launching ramps become difficult to use. More than 50 percent of the courtesy docks at the boat ramps will be unusable; silting and drop-offs at ramps may increase. Approximately 70 percent of the privately-owned boat docks at the lake become unusable.

The project office will continue to provide press releases to the media to explain what recreation opportunities are still available. In addition to the measures identified above, projects that require lower reservoir levels may be accomplished. These include renourishing beach areas, strengthening shoreline protection, extending boat launching ramps, and installing shoal markers.