



West Point Lake FAQ's

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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West Point Lake Frequently Asked Questions

Why is water released from West Point Lake when the lake is not full and why didn't the lake refill this past year?

West Point Lake has a number of project purposes. These include; recreation, hydropower, navigation, flood damage reduction, fish and wildlife, and water supply/quality. Under normal hydrologic conditions all these purposes can be met while keeping the lake levels high. However, under drought conditions there may not be enough water to meet all purposes as desired. At West Point Lake there are downstream flow requirements that must be met. These are; a minimum flow of 670 cfs for water quality directly below the dam and a varying minimum flow requirement for endangered species in the Apalachicola River.

Why does West Point Lake's water level fluctuate so much?

Sometimes during extreme high flow or low flow periods West Point's lake level will fluctuate at a rapid pace. During high flow or flood events, West Point is used to store water to prevent flooding downstream of the dam. Once the flood has passed and it is safe to evacuate water from the lake, the lake is typically returned to its normal seasonal pool to make room for the possibility of another flood event. During droughts the lake can sometimes drop at a rapid pace as water is needed to meet downstream flow requirements mentioned above and balance the lake level at West Point with the other federal storage lakes on the ACF system. While the Corps always attempts to decrease the lake level in a gradual, controlled manner sometimes this can become difficult when water is needed immediately to meet the downstream requirements.

How does one particular congressionally authorized project purpose "trump" others?

The Corps operates its projects and the system to meet all Congressionally authorized purposes and existing laws as efficiently as possible with the available resource (water).

What does RIOP mean and why is it necessary?

RIOP stands for the "Revised Interim Operating Plan". This is the plan for releases at Jim Woodruff Dam (Lake Seminole) to support species in the Apalachicola River which are protected under the Endangered Species Act. This operational plan was developed through consultation of the Corps and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It is necessary to ensure that the proper habitat is provided to support these threatened and endangered species.

What would happen if the Corps unilaterally violated the ACF RIOP?

The RIOP is the Corps operational plan developed through consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to meet the requirements of the Endangered Species Act and will not be violated.

Why are you generating power at the sacrifice of recreation and businesses on the lake?

It is a common misconception that the Corps generates hydropower to meet a hydropower demand during serious droughts. While hydropower is an authorized project purpose of West Point Dam, it is done in conjunction with meeting flow requirements during droughts.



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Why does the lake go down even after it has rained?

When a significant amount of rain falls anywhere in the ACF Basin it often increases the minimum flow requirement for releases into the Apalachicola River (RIOP). This affects all three federal storage lakes in the ACF basin as they are often used to help meet this requirement. Therefore, many times when there is significant rain that raises the lake level, some or all of that water added may need to be used to support this flow requirement while also distributing the water equally among Lanier, West Point, and Walter F. George.

Why do we have to artificially sustain an endangered species at the expense of our lake levels when the species has survived for years prior to the lakes being here?

The Endangered Species Act is a law passed by Congress. As such, the Corps, nor any other Federal agency, can decide which laws it will abide by and which it will ignore. Every Federal agency must be in compliance with the ESA and use their authorities to further the purposes of the Act. Federal agencies must ensure that their actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat. As to the historic aspects of the species existence, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would be the appropriate agency to contact, not the Corps.

Why is sustaining endangered species more important than keeping the lake level up for recreation and other purposes?

The Endangered Species Act is a law passed by Congress. The Corps makes every effort to balance the system to meet all authorized purposes while complying with the law.

At what point does normal human usage (recreation, drinking water, etc) trump protecting the endangered species?

Water supply, water quality and all other legal requirements are met even when the resource (water) becomes limited due to drought conditions.

Why is Lake Harding full most almost all year, while West Point Lake is very seldom full anytime?

Lake Harding is a privately owned project operated by the Georgia Power Company. This lake is what is called a “run of river” project. That means all water that comes into the lake is passed through the dam, holding the lake level at a steady elevation. The main purpose of Lake Harding is to generate power. Lake Harding fluctuates very little because there is very little usable storage in the lake to provide any significant amount of water for other purposes downstream. Using the small amount of storage in Lake Harding to help meet flow requirements downstream could completely deplete the lakes usable storage in a matter of weeks and therefore would be of little help in maintaining higher lake levels at Lanier, West Point, and Walter F. George.

West Point Lake was full in March of this year, but the level dropped quickly in the months afterward. Why did this happen?

Rainfall in February and early March allowed West Point and Walter F. George to refill to well above their normal winter lake levels. However, conditions in late March and early April became extremely dry. By late April, many areas on the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers were seeing record low streamflows as a result of the drought conditions. Releases were made to meet downstream flow requirements.



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Why can't the US Army Corps of Engineers hold the lake level steady during the spring fish spawn period at West Point Lake?

During the fish spawning period the Corps attempts to operate the lakes in a manner that supports the spawning of fish while still meeting the other project purposes. During extreme events such as droughts and floods this can become impossible. Over the past year the ACF basin has been in an extreme drought. During periods of drought there is often not enough natural streamflow to meet downstream flow requirements mentioned above. When this happens water from the federal lakes on the ACF must be used to support this flow requirement leading to a decline in lake levels. These flow requirements must be met by federal law and cannot be violated at any time including during the fish spawn period.

If we know we are prone to drought why not conserve the water when the chance exists at West Point Lake?

During times when drought conditions are being forecast the Corps will take the opportunity to conserve water above normal winter pool while still maintaining a "safe" amount of flood storage. The determination to operate above normal full winter lake elevation is evaluated on a case by case basis. This past winter/spring the ACF was still in the middle of a severe drought and as a result, West Point Lake was held well above its normal winter lake elevation. The decline in the lake level since early March is a direct result of water being needed to meet downstream flow requirements and not an effort to draw the lake back down to its normal winter pool.

During a drought, how do lower flows and low lake levels impact water quality?

During lows flows and low lake levels, water quality in West Point may be negatively impacted.

Many communities have stated that when the lake level is low, the local economy suffers with low visitation. In a struggling economy, local businesses need the draw of lake users. How does economic impact affect the Corps decision in managing the lake level?

The Corps operates West Point for authorized project purposes.

How would the two new proposed reservoirs near Atlanta impact water flows in the Chattahoochee River?

At this point it is unknown how these reservoirs will impact the system.