

Boaters face longer wait at Chittenden Locks in Ballard as dry weather continues



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SEATTLE--Boats locking through the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks may face longer wait times as the Army Corps of Engineers works now to conserve water and reduce the odds that Lake Washington will fall below normal levels. The Corps operates the Chittenden Locks in Ballard, which passes more than 57,000 vessels a year and also regulates the level of Lakes Washington and Union.

The Corps raised the level of the lake early, cut nighttime smolt flume operation and curtailed saltwater drain operation to conserve water this year. It is now necessary to consolidate lockages as an additional means to increase water conservation.

Lock operators will begin to hold lockages until boats fill the lock chamber whenever possible, increasing wait times up to an hour before boats enter the lock chamber.

A dry summer, reduced spring runoff and dedicated flows for juvenile salmon migration have combined this year to threaten minimum lake levels. By starting conservation measures now, the Corps increases the odds that the lake will stay at or above 20 feet--the normal low elevation for the lake. If conditions worsen, the Corps may extend wait times to enter the large lock. If summer rains are above normal, wait times will be reduced. It is likely that increased wait times will last through August and perhaps mid-September.

Additionally, the center gates in the large lock chamber are out for repairs until early to mid-September, so the Corps doesn't have the usual option of using half the large lock chamber to lock boats through. Using the entire large lock chamber, each large lockage uses more water and introduces more saltwater into the freshwater system.

"Despite a low snow pack and low runoff in the spring, we did fill Lake Washington in May," said Marian Valentine, water manager at the Corps. "Since then, however, the weather has been warmer and drier than normal. Higher temperatures increase evaporation from the lake. June rain was only one-third of normal, and July and August are usually dry, so we don't expect rain to bail us out."

The Corps raises the lake elevation each spring to 22 feet above sea level for recreation and fish

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passage and lowers the lake elevation to 20 feet for the winter each year to reduce storm damage.

Current lake levels and yearly average lake elevations are available on-line at

[Water Management](#)