

Record dry weather means Lake Washington likely to fall below normal low level



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SEATTLE--Despite efforts to conserve water at the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks, the Army Corps of Engineers expects Lake Washington to fall below its normal winter elevation of 20 feet by the end of September. The Corps regulates the level of Lakes Washington and Union through operation of spillway gates at the Locks.

"Today will be the 59th day in a row with 70 degrees or above," according to Corps meteorologist Larry Schick. "The old record was 49 days in a row in 1958. I expect we will hit 70 or above until and including Saturday, Sept. 6. Total rainfall for May, June, July and Aug of 2003 has been the driest on record."

With no change in weather forecasts this fall, the lake is expected to drop another 5-6 inches by the end of September, resulting in a lake elevation of 19.8 feet Corps datum. Rain and cooler weather forecast later this weekend may reduce that rate of decrease. Similar weather conditions existed in 1987, and by the end of that October the lake elevation dropped to 19.44 feet.

The Corps normally holds the lakes at a winter elevation of 20 feet to provide flood control for Seattle and reduce potential shoreline damage from winter storms. The Corps begins raising the level each spring to 22 feet to benefit fish and for summer recreation.

Boaters should expect continued delays when locking through and should use the locks prudently considering current water supply issues. This year to conserve water at the Locks the Corps has:

- Reduced leakages in the spillway bays
- Maximized use of the small locks
- Operated the saltwater drain for most efficient control of saltwater intrusion
- Enacted a 1-hour wait for vessels using the large lock.

To further aid conservation, the large lock's center gates will return to operation by middle of September, allowing lock operators to fill half the large chamber at times rather than the whole large lock chamber.

The warm weather and lack of precipitation this year has also affected the drinking water supply for the region. Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) operates reservoirs on the South Fork Tolt River and the Cedar River, a major tributary to Lake Washington. Although water supplies are currently adequate for a typical fall season, SPU urges customers to use water wisely to help ensure sufficient supplies for fish and people. Hot, dry weather can be of particular concern in late summer when stream flows often drop to the lowest levels of the year and salmon begin returning to spawn.

Boaters and lake dwellers are encouraged to monitor Lake Washington's elevation any time on the Intranet [here](#). The site provides current elevation information as well as a graph of Lake Washington's average elevation throughout the year. You can also get to this site through <http://www.nws.usace.army.mil> by clicking on the "Lake and River Level" link.