

Drought frequently asked questions

Q: Why are you releasing water from the reservoirs when it is so dry?

A: It's important to remember that each of our dams and reservoirs are part of an entire river basin, and that important as water supply certainly is, waters flowing throughout the whole river system are also vitally important to every community in the river basin. Falls Lake, for example, has part of its water allocated specifically for water supply and part for water quality. We release amounts of water from the *water quality* portion of the pool downstream. This water serves to make sure that industries and other critical facilities can continue to operate without causing serious pollution, it ensures that other communities downstream who draw water from the river are getting good quality water, and it also preserves water flows and quality so that we do not see serious ecological damage, like fish kills. If rainfall and inflows to the river system below a dam raise the flows in the river to healthy levels, we are able to cut back our water quality releases and conserve more water. For now, we are releasing just enough water to ensure minimum flows in our rivers and keep water quality safe.

Q: Why aren't you dredging Falls Lake so that it will hold more water?

A: Adding to the capacity of Falls Lake through dredging is an engineering measure that could be considered. However, dredging isn't practicable as an emergency measure to increase water supply. In fact, with the current negative rate of inflows to the lake, dredging would only lower the total water level and not add water to storage. Or as you might put it more bluntly—if we dug a deeper hole right now, all we'd have would be a deeper hole! Rainfall is the only short term cure. In the long run, dredging could potentially increase storage. Such an undertaking would need to address the needs of all the users for water from the lake and river system, a process culminating in Congressional authorization would be required, and preparatory investigative work would have to be done.

Q: Looking at your water management numbers, it appears the Corps is releasing more water from Falls Lake now than in the drought month of October, 2002. How can you be doing that?

A: In 2002, the Neuse River was receiving some rainfall and inflows from tributaries below Falls Dam. Thus, the lower Neuse had better flows and we didn't have to release as much water from the lake in order to ensure adequate flows. This year, the entire region is dry and flows in the lower Neuse are lower. More water from the lake is needed to meet the flow requirements in 2007. Of course if we get significant rains and improved flows below the dam we would certainly cut back flows from the dam.

Drought frequently asked questions (cont)

Q: Does the Wilmington District of the Corps have plans to build more reservoirs?

A: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers does not currently have authority to build reservoirs for the primary purpose of providing water supply. That is generally a secondary purpose of many reservoirs built primarily for flood damage reduction. At the present time, the Wilmington District does not have any plans to build more multi-purpose reservoirs that provide flood risk management features. In recent years local and regional governments have continued to build water supply facilities, although this is a multi-year process and requires a great deal of effort on the part of many agencies. The Corps does, through our Regulatory Division, work with communities and regional governments who plan to build new or modify existing reservoirs to increase water supply. We are also able to work closely with both industry and local, regional, and state governments seeking water supply storage reallocations in our existing reservoirs.

Q: If Falls Lake or any other reservoir totally runs out of water supply, what will the Corps do to help communities then?

A: The Corps stands ready to assist, at the request of state government. Under federal Public Law 84-99 the Corps can provide certain types emergency assistance to temporarily meet minimum public health and welfare requirements for potable water until the state and its localities can restore water supply.

Q: Why doesn't the Corps restrict city water use to save water?

A: The Corps of Engineers works with industries, municipalities and regional governments that have purchased storage through legally binding agreements which either allocate or reallocate a specified percentage of the project storage in a given reservoir for use as water supply. The storage allocation owner in turn governs the use of that allocation. Thus, restrictions on water use, like a ban on at-home car washing, lawn watering, or reduced production are the right and responsibility of the individual storage owner. The state government may, in emergency situations, intervene to mandate conservation measures.

Drought frequently asked questions (cont)

Q: What is the effect of the lower water levels on recreation and other activities around the Wilmington District's Lakes?

A: All visitors to our lakes are strongly advised to call ahead or check with our visitor assistance centers or with the state parks authorities for any information about hazards or closures related to low water. At this time all five of our lakes are more than five feet lower than the guide curve, and Falls Lake is more than eight feet low. Some boat ramps are obviously unusable, with the paved ramp high and dry. Many boat ramps and swim beaches are closed. Boaters who do get onto the lake should be extremely careful to watch for shoaled areas, snags and other underwater obstructions that are now near enough to the surface to ground or damage boats. We especially caution visitors not to venture out on mud flats exposed by falling water. These areas may not be solid ground, but instead could be a 'bottomless pit' of mud. At least one visitor had to be rescued after sinking in mud up to his chest. We encourage everyone to be on guard against possible safety hazards related to low water conditions.

Q: Does your Regulatory program offer any special help or permit relief to address drought-related issues?

A: To date, our normal Regulatory permitting processes have worked well to take care of the drought-related needs that have been brought to us. We do have the capability to set an emergency permitting process in motion, and we are prepared to do that as soon as we see municipalities and others approaching us with these needs. Our Regulatory Division strongly urges any municipality or other entity that anticipates needing a permit to move forward on a drought-related measure to contact us immediately! Early communication can help our Regulators help you more effectively.