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From The Morning Call

Whitewater plan evaporates

Francis E. Walter Dam's allocation for Lehigh River depleted two months early

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Of The Morning Call

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A well-publicized plan to turn the Lehigh River into a seasonal mecca for whitewater enthusiasts has evaporated in the hot summer sun.

The whitewater weekend scheduled for Aug. 6-7 was canceled because of lack of water, and four more whitewater events planned for the coming weeks face the same fate unless soaking rains drench the region.

Whitewater releases on the river are controlled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which owns and operates the Frances E. Walter Dam in Kidder Township, Carbon County.

This spring, the Corps raised the level of the reservoir behind the dam by 35 feet, storing an additional 1.75 billion gallons of water in the process. That was supposed to be enough to provide for 22 whitewater release days from May-October and boost the river's trout fishery by increasing the minimum downstream flow to 150 cubic feet per second.

However, this summer's unusually dry weather has reduced flows into the reservoir to a trickle. As a result, the extra water that was supposed to last until early October was used up by the beginning of August and after only a dozen whitewater release days.

The reservoir is now at its normal summertime level, and the amount of water being released from the dam is equal to what's coming into the reservoir — about 60-70 cubic feet per second. No additional water can be stored without heavy rainfall.

"I think that in some people's minds, this was a failure," Corps spokesman Merv Brokke said. But "it's almost impossible to anticipate ... this historically low rainfall that we've had this year."

The 2005 whitewater plan was developed by the Corps, along with the Delaware River Basin Commission, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The agencies also solicited input from local paddling organizations, conservation groups, private boaters and fishermen.

In addition to increasing recreational opportunities on the river, the new flow plan was hailed as an economic boon to the region. The Pocono Mountain Vacation Bureau estimated the value of whitewater releases at \$2.28 million per day.

An estimated 6,200 rafters and boaters travel down the Lehigh each release day, benefiting whitewater guide services, bed-and-breakfasts, hotels, restaurants, gas stations and retail shops, officials said.

Although critics say the Corps and its cooperating agencies dropped the ball by not storing even more water during the springtime rainy season, Brokke said the Corps needs to conduct a study to determine how much water can safely be stored

behind the dam while still maintaining adequate flood control capacity.

Besides, Brokke said, there already have been more whitewater release days this season than the seven held in prior years.

"If you look at the bigger picture, we've had more releases this year so far, and that's not to say that the rain won't come," he said.

Remaining scheduled whitewater releases for this year include: Aug. 20-21 (target flow of 750 cubic feet per second), Sept. 3-4 (target flow of 750-1,000 cfs), Sept. 17-18 (target flow of 750-1,000 cfs) and Oct. 1-2 (target flow of 750-1,000 cfs).

However, Brokke said all of those releases will likely be cancelled unless the Lehigh River watershed receives an unusually large amount of rainfall over the next several weeks.

"It's got to be several inches of sustained rain over a period of time," he said.

For updates on the water-release schedule, or more information about Frances E. Walter Dam, visit <http://www.nap.usace.army.mil/Projects/FEWalter/> CQ or call 866-531-2055.

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