

**Meredith sinks to record level
Drought plan not in use, but on horizon**

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LAKE MEREDITH - Sitting at 63.11 feet Monday, Lake Meredith's water depth is at an all-time low, according to Canadian River Municipal Water Authority officials.

The lake slipped below the record low of 63.36 feet, reached in May 1981, on Thursday, said Kent Satterwhite, CRMWA general manager, and it continues to drop under the heat and drought conditions.

That's a drop of more than 6 feet this year from a high of 69.56 feet in January.

"And there's no end in sight," Satterwhite said.

But there's hope, he said.

"Every time the lake gets low like this, at the end of it there's a huge flushing rain that brings it up 20 or 30 feet. We're waiting on that."

Karren Brown, superintendent of Lake Meredith National Recreation area, said the marina boat ramp is open and Fritch Fortress is barely open under "Launch at your own risk" signs.

She said with the return to school and cooler temperatures, more people will utilize the back country for four-wheeling and "getting away from it all" and there will be less focus on the lake.

"I'm hoping this winter it will fill back up," she said. "The level increased 18 inches under the late May and early June rains, but the heat that we've had makes it evaporate fast."

Dropping lake levels have not necessitated implementation of the drought contingency plan, Satterwhite said, but it is a possibility down the road.

Under revision, the drought contingency plan should be complete in October, he said. At that time, the board will consider going into drought contingency mode, which would mean reducing the amount of lake water sent to cities.

"I don't really expect that to happen," he said.

Satterwhite said the Roberts County groundwater project is the saving factor. While pumping is limited by several broken pumps, new ones are being brought on-line this month and next month, he said.

CRMWA can pump 40,000 acre feet of groundwater per year under its permit, and in emergency situations, he said, it can ask for 50,000 acre feet, "which might be a possibility next year if we go into drought mode."

Currently, he said CRMWA is using 50 percent well water and 50 percent lake water. Satterwhite said CRMWA hoped to blend 25 percent well and 75 percent lake water, "but because the lake is so salty, it's a half or even more now."

The state limit on chlorides is 300 parts per million, he said, and the lake water now is more than 500 parts per million, which is also a record.

"We're not able to blend it to the state level right now because of the limited pumping," Satterwhite said. "The cities are required to blend in extra water if they are to meet the state's secondary standards."

CRMWA serves about 500,000 people in 11 member communities in the Panhandle and South Plains: Pampa, Borger, Amarillo, Plainview, Lubbock, Slaton, Tahoka, O'Donnell, Lamesa, Brownfield and Levelland.

Dan Coffey, city of Amarillo director of utilities, said pumping extra water from its well fields in Randall and Carson counties is a possibility if CRMWA makes any reductions.

"If they cut back, we'll obviously have to pump more from our well fields. If they institute some level of their drought contingency plan, then our drought plan, which mirrors theirs, will implement restrictions," Coffey said.

Stage 1 would be a voluntary request of citizens to water on an odd/even watering schedule and it progresses from there, he said.

Coffey said that historically, even before CRMWA had the Roberts' field, Amarillo blended water from its well fields to get the chloride levels down.

In 2002, he said, the split for water was 62 to 38 between CRMWA water and well water.

Jim Harder, city of Borger director of utilities, said his city shouldn't see too much impact from low Meredith levels because it is in a unique position.

Borger receives unmixed well water from the Roberts County well fields and blends it on a third basis with water from its own well field near Stinnett and Lake Meredith water.

"We only use 50 percent of our allotment from Lake Meredith anyway," Harder said.