

# Drought might shutter ramps on Lake Travis

## Half of boat ramps could be closed by Memorial Day.

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If no significant rain falls in the Highland Lakes watershed in the next few months, at least half of the public boat ramps on Lake Travis could be closed by Memorial Day weekend.

The closures, which would affect one of the lake's busiest weekends of the year, would be the result of the drought revealing the lake's true character: It is a reservoir where beauty and recreation take a back seat to longstanding water contracts.

"The (coastal) farmers were the first people to use the water, so they have the oldest rights," said David Walker, the Lower Colorado River Authority's river operations center supervisor. "That's the way water rights work in Texas. First come, first served."

In other words, the farmers have water contracts, and so do the City of Austin and some other entities. But recreational users generally only get what's there.

Water releases from Mansfield Dam, which began March 1 for irrigation of rice and other crops by farmers on the coast, are expected to become noticeable by April, when the lake level will be dropping about a foot every two weeks.

That rate will increase as water releases accelerate in May and June before slacking off in July. They will resume in August before trailing off in September and October.

As the releases accelerate, the decline of the water level will become more noticeable because the lake is shaped like the top half of an hourglass: wide at the top and narrow at the bottom.

"So the rate of drop increases as the lake level gets lower," Walker said.

Three of the lake's 10 public boat ramps, operated by Travis County or the LCRA for putting in and taking out trailered boats, were not safe for use Saturday because the drought has left the lake at 663.8 feet above sea level, about 20 feet lower than normal for this time of year. The ramps considered unusable at that level were at Cypress Creek, Jones Brothers Park and the Camp Creek Recreation Area.

By May 30, ramps at Arkansas Bend and the Gloster Bend Recreation Area also could be unusable.

Few droughts eliminate the use of all the public boat ramps on Lake Travis. The one at the park beside Mansfield Dam, for instance, is usable until the lake drops below 645.5 feet above sea level. But that could happen if we receive no significant rain by the end of the year.

"The lake probably will be down around 640 or 645 by the end of the year if it doesn't rain," LCRA spokesman Bill McCann said.

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### **Travis' level affects boat ramps**

Elevation above sea level below which Lake Travis public boat ramps are unusable

- Arkansas Bend: 660
- Camp Creek Recreation Area: 667\*
- Cypress Creek: 666\*
- Gloster Bend Recreation Area: 662
- Jones Brothers Park: 664 (est.)\*
- Mansfield Dam: 645.5
- Narrows Recreation Area: 658
- Pace Bend: 651
- Sandy Creek: 648
- Bob Wentz Park: 650

\*Not safely usable Saturday, when lake level was 663.85.

Source: Lower Colorado River Authority