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Lanier flirts with 1,071 feet

Monday showers bring 3.99 inches to Gainesville

For the first time in more than four years, Lake Lanier is less than a foot below its full level.

The lake rose nearly a foot with Monday's rains, putting it within inches of full pool at 1,070.74 at 6:15 a.m. on Tuesday. With more rain forecast throughout the week, Lanier will almost certainly reach its full level of 1,071 feet above sea level.

The lake's full pool elevation has not been recorded since September 2005. Between then and now, an extreme drought in North Georgia caused the lake's level to drop to record-breaking lows that were more than 20 feet below Lanier's full level.

Lanier will reach its highest point at a time when the area is supposed to be at its driest. Even the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the lake, did not expect that the lake would reach full pool this month.

The lake's level normally drops in October, said Pat Robbins, a public affairs officer for the corps.

The corps' most recent projections predicted that the lake would reach a height of 1,069.4 feet this week, and begin to drop again throughout the rest of the month. Those projections were posted on the corps' Web site on Oct. 6.

But on Monday, as 3.99 inches of rain was recorded at Gainesville's Lee Gilmer Memorial Airport, it became likely that the lake would soon reach full pool.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't make it today," said Val Perry, executive vice president of the Lake Lanier Association, a volunteer group that strives to preserve water quality and quantity in the lake.

For the communities on the lake's 692 miles of shoreline, a fuller lake means safer recreation and could mean a more robust local economy. The higher water levels will make lakeside real estate look like an attractive investment again, and allow marinas to retrieve boats from dry docks.

"There have been a lot of people laid off because of this drought and the low water levels, and I think a lot of that will come back (now)," Perry said.

One local group, the 1071 Coalition, is trying to ascertain just how much of an impact the lake has on the local economy, said Kit Dunlap, president of the

Greater Hall Chamber of Commerce and vice president of the 1071 Coalition.

The group is conducting a web-based survey of businesses around the lake to see how its level impacts their businesses.

"What we're doing is trying to do the economic impact analysis of Lake Lanier when it's full and what happens, like in the last two or three years where it's been at low, low lake levels, what does it do to the economy?" Dunlap said.

While Grier Todd, president of the 1071 Coalition, called the rising lake level "absolutely great news for everybody," he said the same old issues hang over the lake's future.

"Just because we're back at 1,071, it doesn't mean we can't get in trouble again if we don't make some changes," Todd said.

Though the last drought has clearly ended, the area is not exempt from future droughts. Crucial decisions need to be made about how the lake will be managed in future droughts without the reservoir bearing "the brunt of keeping the whole basin watered during the drought," Todd said.

"We probably need to work a little harder now just because there is water in the lake and people maybe don't have that real sense of urgency that they did when it was 20 feet below full pool, but we've still got to zero in on trying to make sure that it doesn't happen again," Todd said.

Dunlap said she hoped that the full level would not keep people from continuing to conserve the lake's resource.

"We mustn't forget that we still need to practice our conservation," Dunlap said. "And that's my fear in times of a full lake and plenty of rain, that people tend to forget ... hopefully, during the drought, we changed our habits somewhat. We'll see."

And whether it is full or not, Georgia still faces a very real possibility of losing Lake Lanier as a major source of drinking water.

In July, U.S. District Court Judge Paul Magnuson ruled in the tri-state water wars that water withdrawal was not a congressionally authorized use of Lake Lanier. The ruling gives Georgia three years to stop using the reservoir for water consumption, negotiate another deal with Florida and Alabama or have Congress reauthorize the lake's use.

"It is like a bigger boulder hanging out there that might fall at any moment, so you know you've got to deal with it one way or the other and you've got to come up with a workable solution for all the parties involved," Todd said.

But for now, the corps will continue releasing water from the lake at the current

level; any changes to the amount of water released at Buford Dam will depend on the needs of the entire river basin.

“Even if we reach it (full pool), which would be great, it’s just going to depend on what the future holds what occurs after that,” Robbins said.

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Today: Partly sunny, with a high near 72. North wind around 5 mph.

Tonight: A chance of showers and thunderstorms, then showers likely and possibly a thunderstorm after 2am. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 57. East wind around 5 mph. Chance of precipitation is 60 percent.

Wednesday: Showers, mainly before 2pm. High near 57. East wind around 10 mph. Chance of precipitation is 90 percent.

Wednesday Night: Showers and thunderstorms likely. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 54. Chance of precipitation is 60%.

Thursday: A 50 percent chance of showers and thunderstorms. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 66.

Thursday Night: Showers and thunderstorms likely. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 55. Chance of precipitation is 60%.

Friday: A chance of showers. Mostly cloudy, with a high near 60. Chance of precipitation is 30 percent.

Friday Night: A 20 percent chance of showers. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 47.

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