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Lower Colorado River Authority: Drought Update

Drought intensifies across Lower Colorado River Basin

LCRA managing water supply to meet region's needs

A prolonged stretch of exceptionally dry weather is causing the drought across Texas and the lower Colorado River basin to intensify.

"This has been the driest nine months in Texas history – the absolute driest," LCRA General Manager Becky Motal said. "This is a serious situation, but it's not dire. Water flowing into the Highland Lakes is down to a trickle in places. Rest assured LCRA is managing the region's water supply to make it through this exceptional drought, and we are asking everyone to use water as efficiently as possible and reduce water use wherever they can."

The nine months from October 2010 through June 2011 have been the driest for that nine-month period in Texas since 1895, when the state began keeping rainfall records. Across most of the Hill Country and the Austin area, rainfall since last October is between 12 and 16 inches below normal. Across the eastern counties of Central Texas and the middle Texas coast, rainfall is running more than 20 inches below normal.

Despite the severely dry conditions, this drought is not as bad as the worst in history – the 10-year drought of the 1940-50s. Lakes Buchanan and Travis are in better condition than they were then, even with the low inflows, increased evaporation and water being used by LCRA customers. LCRA built the lakes in the 1930s and '40s to store water during times of plentiful rain so the region would have a reliable supply during a prolonged drought. That is exactly what is happening now. The lakes are more than 50 percent full and LCRA is confident it can meet the needs of its firm customers, such as cities and industry, through a prolonged drought as severe as the worst one this basin has ever experienced.

With the lack of rain this spring, temperatures heated up to record levels in June, which was the hottest June on record statewide. Across the Colorado basin, the month was among the top three hottest on record. There have already been more than 30 days of 100 degrees or hotter this summer, and long-range weather forecasts indicate rainfall will likely remain below normal through July and August. Barring tropical activity out of the Gulf of Mexico, very hot and dry weather will likely continue at least into early September.

The tributaries that feed lakes Travis and Buchanan, the region's water

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[LCRA Boat Ramp Info](#)

[Daily River Report](#)

Featured Video

Aerial video of Lake Travis and Pedernales River



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If you live or work in the Highland Lakes area, it's easy

supply reservoirs, are down to a trickle. In June two major tributaries, the Pedernales River and Sandy Creek, dried up in some locations.

to save water and money.

Between January and June, the amount of water flowing into the lakes, called inflows, was less than 10 percent of average and is the lowest for any such period dating back to 1942 when LCRA finished construction of Lake Travis. Inflows in June were less than 1 percent of average. The prolonged stretch of hot and dry weather is also causing significant evaporation on the Highland Lakes. From January through June, evaporation was about 97,000 acre-feet, about 14 percent more than in 2009.

Because of low inflows, increased evaporation and water use by LCRA customers, lakes Buchanan and Travis are expected to continue to fall at least a foot a week until October. The following table shows current conditions at the lakes, along with projected conditions if extremely dry weather continues through the summer of 2011, as compared to the conditions experienced during the 2009 drought.

	2011			2009	
	July 20	Sept. 1*	Oct. 1*	July 20	Fall (lowest point)
Lake Travis (feet above mean sea level (msl))	642.85 (25 feet below monthly average)	633-637	630-634	639.06	629.83
Lake Buchanan (feet above msl)	999.66 (13.5 feet below monthly average)	990-994	986-991	998.04	989.86
Combined Storage of lakes Buchanan and Travis (million acre-feet) / % of capacity	1.06 / 53%	0.86-0.90 43%-45%	0.77-0.83 38%-41%	.99 49%	0.79 39%

Boat Ramps

As the levels in lakes Travis and Buchanan have dropped, public boat ramps have closed accordingly. As of July 21, Lake Buchanan had 1 of 4 public ramps open and Lake Travis had 1 of 11 public ramps open. By Sept. 1, it is projected that all public ramps on Lake Buchanan will be closed and 1 ramp (Mansfield Dam Park) will remain open on Lake Travis.

Water Management

If extreme dry conditions and very low inflows continue, the combined storage of lakes Travis and Buchanan could fall below 900,000 acre-feet before September 2011, triggering LCRA to ask its customers to conserve more water.

LCRA manages lakes Travis and Buchanan, the region's water supply reservoirs, through its state-approved Water Management Plan. The plan is designed to ensure that cities and industries have the water they need during a drought equal to the worst drought our region has experienced, the 10-year drought of the 1940-50s. These customers, known as firm customers, have never experienced a mandatory water cutback under the plan. This is important because the region's economy depends on reliable drinking water and water to run businesses such as manufacturing facilities and plants that produce electricity to cool homes and businesses.

LCRA is also working hard with all its customers, including its downstream agricultural customers, to manage the water efficiently. For example, Austin, the region's largest city, limits outdoor watering to no more than two days a week, and many other cities in the region do the same. These efforts have had an impact. Even though this year is much drier than 2009, LCRA expects downstream farmers to use about the same amount of water from the lakes this year as in 2009. LCRA is encouraging farmers to use groundwater and LCRA has leased some groundwater wells to supplement the water from the Colorado River. LCRA has stopped new contracts for row and hay crops and will not provide water from the Highland Lakes for duck ponds this year.

LCRA also recently implemented a new rate structure for agricultural customers to help encourage conservation. The new rate structure charges up to triple the regular rate if farmers use excessive amounts of water. LCRA forecasts that the water available to downstream farmers will be cut back significantly next year if the drought continues.

"The drought affects everybody," Motal said. "I want to assure everyone who relies on water from the Colorado River – and that's more than a million people – that LCRA is taking this drought seriously and is working tirelessly to efficiently manage our precious and limited water resources."

