

Low water at Eagle Lake: good for fishing, bad for boating

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Sept. 2, 2008 — “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” wrote Dickens as the opening line for his Tale of Two Cities.” Ironically, the same can be said of Eagle Lake this year.

Falling lake levels have created the best fishing anyone can remember, but the worst boat launching conditions in recent memory as well. Floating a boat to get to that great fishing may soon become problematic.

“To date, the fishing has been awesome,” said Gwen Beck, business manager for Flying Eagle Guide Service & Taxidermy in Spalding, an enterprise owned and operated by her and her husband, Ron, who is a professional fishing guide. “We have had an amazing fishing year.”

That’s the good news caused by the drought, which has had a dramatic effect on lake levels. “As you talk to the old timers who have been fishing this lake for 30 and 40 years,” said Beck, “the general consensus is that this is the lowest the lake has been in 37 years.”

Ironically, those same drought-instigated low water levels threaten to halt boat launches to get to those fish.

The Spalding marina has already been forced to close its north ramp due to plummeting lake levels, which now threaten to make the south ramp unusable for the same reason. “We can’t even use the north launch because it’s only six and a half inches of water,” said the Spalding Community Services District general manager, Merle Lay.

“But, they’re still using it (the south ramp),” Lay quickly added. “They’re still able to get out there and fish. We don’t want to stop people from coming up here.”

Lay reported the marinas at Stones/Bengard and Gallatin are having similar problems, though Spalding seems to have the deepest water for launching boats.

To make matters worse, a sandbar has partially blocked the south ramp at Spalding as lake levels continue dropping, threatening to halt boat traffic in and out of the nearly new marina—a potential economic disaster for all the small lakeside communities on Eagle Lake. “It hurts our economy ... big time,” said Lay. “That’s when (local businesses) make most of their money.”

The calculated size of the menacing sandbar hump is 12 feet square, “right where you go out to the lake,” said Lay.

Prominently visible buoys have been placed on the present channel for safety, and there are presently no plans to close the Spalding marina.

With a mere 1.5 feet of water over the sandbar, access to the south ramp is in obvious jeopardy. “When it drops another seven inches, we won’t be able to bring our boat through,” said Beck, noting that lake levels historically drop dramatically in this same time period. “We’re going to lose that margin of safety in the next three to four weeks.”

“Our busiest months are September, October, and half of November,” said Lay. “That’s when the best fishing is because it gets colder.”

Several fishing guide services on the lake are very nervous. “They’re begging me to do something, if I can,” said Lay.

The SCSD is scrambling to fix the problem before it can halt boat launches altogether. Lay contacted the California Department of Boating and Waterways for emergency assistance to dredge the 12-foot by 12-foot sandbar, to provide certain access to the south boat launch ramp for the upcoming peak fishing season. “They’ve helped us before,” said Lay. “They asked for something in writing, which I sent to them.”

But Lay is concerned about red tape that might delay the immediate dredging needed to solve the problem. “There may be money,” she said, “but I don’t know if it will be quick enough. That’s my concern.”

Dredging would temporarily open a safe channel through the sandbar, allowing safe passage between the lake proper and the south boat launch ramp. “It doesn’t have to be a wide channel,” said Beck, emphasizing that it need only be wide enough to allow boats to pass in both directions. “That will buy us another two months.”

“We’re desperate for help,” said Lay.

“We appreciate any help,” Beck said, adding, “It’s going to be an economic disaster. It will involve every single business that’s up here.”

Depth measurements made in June indicate the lake stood at 5097.92 feet, as much as eight feet below normal levels. And it continues to drop.

“Our lake drops two to three feet within each year because it is a natural lake,” said Beck. “That’s normal. But what is abnormal is that the lake didn’t rise three to four feet this year. It rose only five to six inches this year because of the drought.”

Beck drew a word picture to emphasize how much the present lake level has receded from the original shoreline—a good 200 horizontal feet or more. “If you go down to the water’s edge right now, and you look back up at the marina where the rocks are and the steps come out, that’s where the water level is when it’s full,” she said. “It was lapping at the bottom of those rocks. That’s why they were put there as sort of a breakwater. The bottom of the steps, where you walk down, is where the high water level is when our lake is full.

Beck went on to praise the SDSC for its operation of the marina. “Nobody ever expected the lake to be this low. It’s unheard of,” she said. “It’s perfectly stunning to have our ramp working at this low. And it is truly a credit to our marina that it’s still working.”

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