

Detroit Lake Levels

Many have noted that the water in Detroit Lake is very low. As of October 27, 2011, the lake's surface is at 1333.52 feet above mean sea level. That means the lake is about 1 ½ feet lower than last year at this time (or in late June of this year). The lowered lake has exposed an unusual expanse of beach around much of the lake.

But is "the lake lower than it ever has been", as some have asked?

The short answer is no. In fact in the fall of 2003, it was nearly this low, and in most years during the late 1980's and into the early 1990's, it dropped to levels a few inches lower than it is now.

Reaching further back, (and comparable records start in 1937), the lake was at least six inches lower than now in every year but one from 1937-1945. There were a couple of very low years in the 1960's too.

So what is the Watershed District's role in water level management? Here the answer is none.

For more than 100 years the level of Detroit Lake has been maintained from two to four feet above natural levels by a succession of structures at the Muskrat Lake outlet into Lake Sallie. Originally the lock and dam system was built to facilitate navigation through the Pelican River. Prior to about 1985, the Dunton lock/dam system was sometimes operated by the City of Detroit Lakes to change water levels. Also, at times in the past, Ditch 14 flows were sufficiently heavy (owing to city sewage treatment discharges), that in some dry years the Pelican River reversed itself and flowed back to Little Detroit. A low dam near the West Lake Drive bridge was built to control those situations, but it has since been removed. For at least 25 years, there has been no attempt to manipulate water levels in Detroit Lake.

The current control structure, referred to as Dunton Rapids, was completed in 2001 in order to facilitate fish migration. It was specifically engineered to replicate the flow control attributes of the dam and lock system that it replaced. It is not possible to control flows through Dunton Rapids.

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