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Administration • Land Conservation • Parks • Water Resource Engineering

Date: April 3, 2024
To: Yahara Lakes & River Riparian Property Owners
From: Laura Hicklin 
Dane County Land & Water Resources Department Director
Subject: 2024 Summer Season Information

This letter is to provide you with useful information on Dane County's lake management activities to address questions you may have. The following pages include information and resources on our various programs:

- Lake Levels
- Navigation
- Aquatic Plant Management
- Pier Pick Up Program
- Yahara River Sediment Sediment Removal
- Door Creek Restoration
- Free Native Plants for Schools and Community Projects
- Urban Water Quality Grant Program
- Contact Information

We have witnessed a range in weather patterns over the past several years, from flooding in 2018 to drought condition in 2023. These patterns have resulted in varying water levels and water quality conditions with limited options for intervention. In addition to the challenges presented by the weather, many of services are governed by the WI DNR to ensure that the lake habitat is not negatively impacted.

Recently, the weather has been unseasonably warm and many lake users are excited to get an early start to the season. Typically, the months of March and April are a transition period for water levels to rise from winter to summer water levels. This past winter we had very little snow and spring runoff that would otherwise contribute to filling up the lakes rapidly. The little snow and rain that we did have was absorbed (infiltrated) into the ground due to the lack of frost. Nonetheless, the lakes are rising and we expect to be at summer target levels by the boating season. We ask people to be patient. We anticipate that the lakes may also have early season plant growth as sunlight and rising water temperatures advance the growth process, a result of unseasonably warm temperatures and the lack of winter ice. Improved water clarity over the past two years also results in increased healthy plant life. While increased plant life benefits the lake ecosystem, we understand that these plants can cause frustration for some residents who enjoy swimming, boating and fishing closer to the shore.

Balancing all interests is a challenging task. Our services and conservation efforts create a balance between recreational use and the health of the lakes. We appreciate your interest in the lakes and we aim to provide a positive lake experience for all through our services and conservation efforts.

Use this QR code to quickly access our lake management website, where you will find more information on the topics covered in this mailing.



Lake Levels

Dane County is responsible for maintaining lake levels for the four major lakes on the Yahara Chain: Lake Mendota, Lake Monona, Lake Waubesa and Lake Kegonsa. This responsibility lies within the County's willingness to own and operate the three dams that help control water levels: 1. Tenney, 2. Babcock and 3. LaFollette. The summer minimum and maximum target lake levels were set by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) in 1979 and the lake level orders have not changed since they went in effect. We see varying lake levels, sometimes well outside of the target range, because the weather is the most significant factor in how high or low the lakes are. The target ranges are:

- Summer goals (first runoff event after March 1st) - maintain water levels at the mid-range of summer minimum/maximum target levels
- Winter goals (starting November 1st) - maintain water levels between winter minimum and summer minimum target levels

Lake	Summer Min	Summer Max	1% Flood
Mendota	849.60	850.10	852.8
Monona	844.70	845.20	847.7
Waubesa	844.50	845.00	847.0
Kegonsa	843.00	843.50	845.2

For current and historic lake levels please see our website at: <https://lwr.d.countyofdane.com/Lake-Levels>

Navigation

Dane County maintains navigational buoys extending from Cherokee Lake downstream to Lake Kegonsa. In total, over 170 buoys are installed to mark channels, hazards, and identify slow no wake limits. Traveling from lake to lake can be accomplished using the locks located at the outlets of Lakes Mendota, Waubesa and Kegonsa. A permit is required to travel through the Tenney Locks. Permits can be purchased at any of the kiosks located in the Dane County Parks system or online.

For more information on Tenney Locks and to purchase a lock permit please visit our website at: <https://parks-lwr.d.countyofdane.com/tenney-lock-for-boaters>

Aquatic Plant Management

There are many native aquatic plants in our area lakes that are highly desirable from a biological perspective and it is normal for there to be dense areas of plant growth. Plant growth in and of itself is not a sign of a problem. The fact that we cut and harvest aquatic plants has led to confusion on this point as some people now mistakenly believe that aquatic plant growth is unnatural. We consult with biologists on a regular basis and make program modifications with the intent to protect and enhance desirable plant growth.

Dane County operates a fleet of 11-12 harvesters and three barges. The harvesting of aquatic plants is regulated by the WDNR. A majority of the allowable harvesting occurs along a setback from the shorelines for recreational access for all lake users. Harvesting is not allowed in less than 3' of water by the WDNR permit. Residents often ask for removal of plant material that has floated in between piers and plant growth within the nearshore area. Harvesters will not navigate into these areas due to risk to property and

harvesters and because it is a permit violation. Residents can hand remove this material and place it on their piers for collection by the pier pickup program (additional information below).

Please do not berate staff, offer tips or take any other actions that pressures or encourages staff to break the rules by harvesting between piers or in less than 3' of water.

Harvesting typically begins in late May and runs through early September, once plants reach within 16" of the surface. Waterbodies are scouted to evaluate plant growth and densities that determine priorities. Standard cutting involves 40-60' widths beginning near the end of piers. Access lanes to deeper water occur at various intervals that are cut perpendicular to the shoreline. This year, real-time GPS units will be installed on our aquatic plant harvesters as a tool to help improve efficiencies for cutting aquatic plants.

For more information on our aquatic plant harvesting program please visit our website at:
<https://lwrdd.countyofdane.com/what-we-do/lake-management/aquatic-plant-management>

Pier Pick Up Program

As an additional service to riparian property owners, Dane County operates two barges that collect lake-generated material that is placed on docks and piers. This service allows property owners to place lake vegetation on the end of their piers for collection. Any brush, limbs, grass clipping or other terrestrial material will not be collected. This type of material interferes with and can damage conveyors used for offloading. If any of this material is found, it will not be collected and the material will be left on your pier with a placard explaining why. Lakes Monona, Waubesa and Kegonsa shorelines are eligible for this service. On Lake Mendota, the shorelines in the City of Madison, Town of Westport, and City of Middleton will receive pickup services. Shorelines in the Village of Shorewood Hills and Maple Bluff will not receive pickup services because those municipalities chose not to participate in the program.

A full schedule of pick up dates on the lakes is posted on our website at:
<https://lwrdd.countyofdane.com/what-we-do/lake-management/aquatic-plant-management/pier-pickup>

Yahara River Sediment Removal

After the 2018 flooding, a task force was convened to gather public comment on mitigating future flood events. One of the recommendations from the task force was to remove sediment accumulation in the Yahara River. A technical committee report found that the efficient movement of water through each lake is undermined by sediment build-up in the Yahara River. While sediment movement is a naturally occurring process, the accumulation of sediment in the Yahara River and Lakes is greatly increased by human activity, including urban development and winter sand operations. Dane County began sediment removal in the Yahara River in 2021 and over 191,200 cubic yards of sediment has been removed to date. Deepening the Yahara River will aid in moving water through the system; especially during high water events. The sediment removal also serves to remove nutrients which are attached to the sediment while improving recreational opportunities and aquatic habitat. In 2024, sediment removal will be completed downstream from Lake Kegonsa to Highway B and will start upstream from Lake Kegonsa to Dyreson Road.

For more information on the sediment removal project please visit our website at:
<https://lwrdd.countyofdane.com/CurrentProjects/Detail/Yahara-River-Sediment-Removal-Project>

Door Creek Restoration

The County is planning a stream and wetland restoration project stemming from implementation of the Door Creek Watershed Management Action Plan and the Legacy Sediment Removal initiative. The project will realign the creek to its previous flow path. Water quality benefits include the removal of phosphorus laden sediment from the existing channel, which will improve the downstream water quality. Habitat improvements associated with the restoration will benefit both terrestrial and aquatic environments with an emphasis on northern pike spawning habitat. Wetlands in the area will also be enhanced and protected.

For more information on the restoration of Door Creek please visit our website at:

<https://lwr.d.countyofdane.com/CurrentProjects/Detail/Door-Creek-Watershed>

Free Native Plants for Schools and Community Projects

Native plants have tremendous water quality benefits and increase habitat and food sources for pollinators. Because of this, the Dane County Land and Water Resources Department has started a native plant growing program to provide free native plants to help schools and community groups in Dane County. These plants will be available in spring and summer each year. Spring plants are donated from community members through the Plant Dane! sale and fall plants are grown by local volunteers.

The next application period will be posted online by the end of May. For more information on the program, including how to apply for plants and how to volunteer for the program, please visit our website at:

<https://lwr.d.countyofdane.com/grants-and-costshare/free-plants>

Urban Water Quality Grant Program

Since 2005, Dane County has made cost-sharing funds available to municipalities via the Urban Water Quality Grant Program. The goals of the Urban Water Quality Grant Program are to improve the quality of urban stormwater runoff entering Dane County lakes, rivers and streams, increase public awareness of urban water quality issues, and provide public education about urban stormwater quality improvement practices. These goals are commonly achieved by the improvement and retrofitting of old stormwater outlets that dump untreated urban runoff into the lakes.

Please contact your local municipality to inquire if there are any potential projects in your neighborhood and to encourage them to apply. For more information on the Urban Water Quality Grant program please visit our website at: <https://lwr.d.countyofdane.com/grants-and-costshare/uwqg>

Contact Information

We are currently filling the vacant Lake Management Supervisor position. Their contact information will be on our website as soon as the position is filled and will be the primary contact in the future. In the meantime, please contact:

- Pete Jopke for questions on navigation and aquatic plant management, jopke@countyofdane.com
- John Reimer for questions on lake levels and Yahara River sediment removal, reimer.john@countyofdane.com
- Kyle Minks for questions on Door Creek restoration, minks.kyle@countyofdane.com
- Laura Hicklin for all other inquiries or to copy on any of the above topics, Hicklin.laura@countyofdane.com
- Vacant, Lake Management Supervisor, contact information coming summer 2024 and available for all inquiries, <https://lwr.d.countyofdane.com/about/contact-us>