

CHASING WATER

Accessing the Missouri River System

By Greg Freeman

Even though wet spring weather brought hope to North Dakota, the much-needed precipitation was of little benefit to the Missouri River System, which continues to endure a six-year drought.

While other upper basin states are also enduring drought conditions, North Dakota has seen the upper reaches of Lake Oahe, which used to extend some 50 miles into the state, simply disappear. Upstream, Lake Sakakawea is about 45 feet below full pool, and near the record all-time low of 1,805 feet above mean sea level.

Despite these concerns, water enthusiasts up and down the Missouri River System will still have suitable access, said Bob Frohlich, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries development supervisor. "Boaters and anglers will still be able to access most areas along the system despite the low water," he said.

It's taken money and teamwork to construct usable ramps on the Missouri River System during times of low water.

The Missouri River System in North Dakota can basically be divided into four portions: upper Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, Lake Sakakawea, the stretch of river between Garrison Dam and Lake Oahe headwaters, and Lake Oahe. "Although traditional Lake Oahe no longer exists in North Dakota – the Missouri is confined to a river channel in this area – there is still access to the upper reaches of that stretch where suitable sites have been identified," Frohlich said.

The Missouri River from Lake Oahe headwaters to Garrison Dam is actually the area least influenced by drought, though the usability of ramps along this stretch depends on how much water is being released from Garrison Dam. Low water releases can create problems at some ramps. "All-in-all, we have pretty good access along the river portion," Frohlich said. "Nearly all the boat ramps along this stretch will again be usable this summer."

On April 1, Lake Sakakawea's elevation was nearly 1,809 feet msl compared to an elevation around 1,810 feet msl one year ago. The

early April forecast, based on estimates of average precipitation, has Lake Sakakawea peaking around 1,812 feet msl sometime in July, and then slowly declining to 1,810 feet msl by year's end.

If precipitation is below average, the lake would only rise to an elevation of about 1,807 feet msl by the end of June, and then fall to 1,802 feet msl by year's end. However, Frohlich said, these forecasts are subject to change depending on the amount of precipitation received. "The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers updates its forecast monthly," he said. "In reality, we will likely be somewhere between 1,807 and 1,812 feet msl during the peak of the boating season."

Frohlich predicted about a dozen usable ramps on the big lake at ice-out. "If we would have been at these water levels three to four years ago, we would have had only one or two usable ramps," he said. "The number of usable ramps we have now can be attributed to the millions of dollars spent, and the infrastructure that has been built in recent years and is now in place."



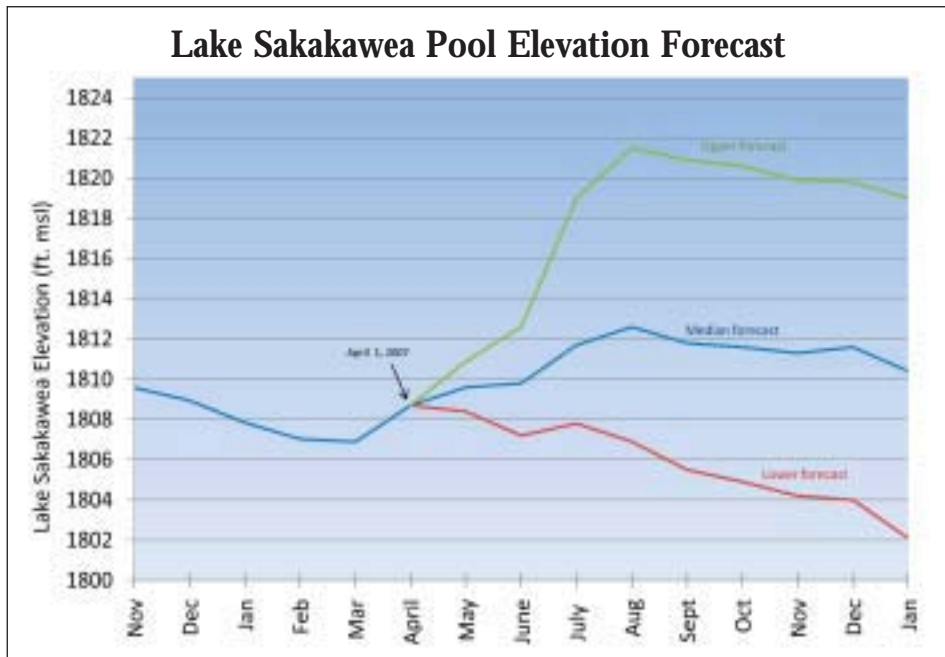
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Despite low water conditions, access on Sakakawea will be similar to summer 2006, when 26 ramps were operational by mid-summer. Based on the current water level forecast, there should be 23 ramps available at the same time this year. "This level of access would not be possible without the cooperative efforts of all interested parties," Frohlich said.

Work required to extend, relocate and make ramps usable is an effort assumed by Game and Fish, Army Corps of Engineers, and many stakeholders around the lake.

"Lake Sakakawea has been and continues to be the state's No. 1 fishery, and the Department has made it a priority to maintain access despite record low water levels," Frohlich said. "Over the last six years, the Department has allocated roughly \$2.5 million for Lake Sakakawea access above and beyond what we normally would spend in our fisheries development program."

GREG FREEMAN is the Department's news editor.



Above: The graph illustrates three different water level scenarios on Lake Sakakawea this summer based on the amount of precipitation received. Due to continued drought, the elevation will likely fall somewhere between the median and lower projections.

Below: North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel, with assistance from other Missouri River System stakeholders, have been chasing receding water levels to provide access for boaters.



Usable Boat Ramps

Following are usable boat ramps on the Missouri River System. Boat ramp status will be updated throughout the summer on the Game and Fish Department's website at gf.nd.gov. Keep in mind that a number of ramps on Lake Sakakawea will require some work after ice-out before they are usable.

Upper Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers

- Confluence (Buford)
- Lewis and Clark Bridge
- Sundheim Park

Lake Sakakawea

- Beulah Bay (low water ramp)
- Charging Eagle Bay
- Dakota Waters
- Deepwater Bay (low water ramp)
- Douglas Bay
- Fort Stevenson State Park
- Four Bears
- Garrison Creek
- Government Bay (low water ramp)
- Hale Marina (proposed)
- Hazen Bay
- Indian Hills
- McKenzie Bay
- New Town Marina (low water ramp)
- Parshall Bay (proposed)
- Pouch Point
- Lake Sakakawea State Park
- Sanish Bay
- Skunk Bay
- Sportsmen's Centennial Park
- Van Hook
- White Earth Bay
- Wolf Creek

Missouri River

- Garrison Dam Tailrace
- Stanton (UPA)
- Washburn
- Sanger
- Steckel (Wilton)
- Hoge's
- Kniefel Landing
- Grant Marsh
- Fox Island
- Little Heart
- Kimball Bottoms (Desert)
- Graner Bottoms
- MacLean Bottoms

Lake Oahe

- Jennerville (Rivory)
- Walker Bottoms
- North Beaver Bay
- Fort Rice
- Hazelton

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