

Watauga, Wilbur Lakes at normal levels for summer recreation season

Watauga and Wilbur Lakes are currently at their normal pool levels as swimmers, boaters and other outdoor enthusiasts prepare for the summer recreational season. Travis Brickey of TVA Media Relations, along with David Bowling, manager of river scheduling, spoke about the river system and what steps TVA takes to maintain the proper levels in its efforts to balance recreation, hydroelectric power and flood control, along with the ever-present environmental concerns such as aquatic habitat.

"In the wintertime, starting after Labor Day, we draw the tributaries down from flood storage, and in mid-March we start bringing those back up to meet the recreational levels by June 1," Brickey said. "Watauga is on track," Bowling stated. "Right now we are at our summer levels at all but three lakes: Norris, Cherokee and South Holston." During the rainy season, when precipitation capable of producing a major flood occurs, the tributary dams such as Watauga, Wilbur and South Holston, will restrict the flow. Toward the end of the season, the mainstream dams restrict the flow further downstream, and then the dams begin to open and water is gradually released from the reservoirs during the dry season.

"You have a lot of runoff in the wintertime, and as you go through spring and summer you have a lot more vegetation that drinks up that runoff," Brickey said. "TVA stores the crest and then releases it after the danger has passed," Bowling explained. The recent floods in and around Nashville actually occurred along the Cumberland River, which is not on the Tennessee River system but flows directly into the Ohio River. Asked what steps the agency would take in the case of prolonged precipitation in the TVA waterway system, Brickey said it depends on the time of year and particular location of the sustained rainfall.

"Anytime that you get 15 inches of rain in a 48-hour period, that's a lot of water to handle. That's very unusual, and things that are man-made will get stressed from something like that." Bowling said in such a case the flows would be held back at the higher elevation dams such as those in Northeast Tennessee.

"As much as practical we would shut off the water coming out of the tributary reservoirs, but like us, most of Nashville's storage is in the east, so if the rain falls below the tributary projects, there's not a lot of places to store it," he explained. "There is very minimal storage along the main stem of the Tennessee River, so it becomes a question of just moving the water through the most effective way possible."

Brickey noted that 15 inches would be a challenge for the system. There are 49 dams in the TVA system; 29 are used to generate power. To illustrate the total amount of water that flows through the Tennessee Valley, Bowling said the minimum discharge from Kentucky Lake, the lowest elevation reservoir in the TVA system, is 12,000 cubic feet per second.
