

Tallest lifting lock east of Rockies open to almost any traffic

At 120 feet tall, Wilson Dam Lock is the tallest single lift lock east of the Rocky Mountains. While some locks lift or lower boat in stages, Wilson Lock lifts or lowers boat and barges as much as 100 feet in a single operation. A group of 75 personal watercraft operators passed through the massive lock July 29 as part of the Tennessee River 600, an annual weeklong journey from Knoxville to Paris, Tenn. The watercraft operators were among the more than 1,100 recreational boaters who pass through Wilson Dam Lock every year. While barges and towboats make up much of the traffic locking through local dams, the locks are open to almost any boat that floats. There is no fee for using the lock.

“We've locked through kayaks, canoes, fishing boats, ski boats, personal watercraft, passenger ships ... The only thing we don't lock through are the personal watercraft that turn over when they stop,” said lockmaster Donald Dean. “If you are in a boat that doesn't have a marine radio where you can call us or you don't have a cell phone so you can call us, there is a chain on each end of the lock that you can pull to let us know you want to lock through. If you are in a boat that will stay upright when stopped, all you have to do is call us or pull that chain and we will let you lock through.” Boaters must have their own ropes for securing their vessel in order to use the lock.

The Tennessee Valley Authority operates the dams, but it is the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that runs the locks.