

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

2006 TEMPORARY OPERATIONS PLAN
FRANCIS E. WALTER DAM AND RESERVOIR
CARBON AND LUZERNE COUNTIES, PENNSYLVANIA

The Francis E. Walter Reservoir, originally known as Bear Creek Reservoir, is located near the convergence of Bear Creek and the Lehigh River in Luzerne and Carbon Counties in northeastern Pennsylvania. It is a man-made impoundment created by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1961 by damming the Lehigh River at the confluence with Bear Creek. The 3,000-foot long, 234-foot high earth-fill dam creates an 80-acre pool at the conservation 1,300-foot National Geodetic Vertical Datum (N.G.V.D.) pool elevation and controls a drainage area of 288 square miles. The reservoir is approximately 86 miles north of Philadelphia, 20 miles southeast of Wilkes Barre, 39 miles south of Scranton and 23 miles north of Allentown. The project area is part of the Pocono Mountain complex.

F.E. Walter, in addition to aiding in flood control along the Lehigh River, is operated for recreation and drought emergency water storage for salinity repulsion in the Delaware River Estuary. The primary purpose of the project is flood control. A secondary purpose is recreation. The F.E. Walter Reservoir was authorized in House Document No. 587, 79th Congress, 2nd Session for Lehigh River flood control protection. The reservoir project was also authorized for recreation as part of Public Law 100-676, Section 6, dated November 17, 1988.

F.E. Walter Reservoir plays a vital role in providing flood control and recreation in the Lehigh River watershed. In the recent past, public interest has grown in regard to modifying operations at F.E. Walter Reservoir to benefit in-lake and downstream recreation meanwhile maintaining flood control capabilities, and protection of the environment. Operation of the reservoir during flood storage events inundates a project access road that crosses the upstream side of the dam. This access road is used by dam personnel for operation and maintenance of the dam and related project features. Historically, pool level operations at F.E. Walter Reservoir have been tailored, in part, to re-open this access road as soon as feasibly possible following a flood storage event. The construction of a new access road across the top of the dam has provided more flexibility in pool level operations. As a result, opportunities to further evaluate and study the public recreational alternatives associated with the reservoir emerged in 2005. A 2005 Environmental Assessment evaluated the temporary raising of the conservation pool elevation of 1300' N.G.V.D. to 1335' N.G.V.D. beginning in mid-April 2005 and ending in October 2005 at which time the pool was returned to the operation conservation pool elevation of 1300'. During this period of time water quality, flow, and recreational data were collected to evaluate the planned change. The data was used to consider long-term reservoir operational plans that enhance public recreation and to provide insight into operational and environmental limits associated with operational changes. Based on operational, environmental, and recreational data collected and evaluated during the 2005 operational pool change, a 2006 modified temporary operations plan has been developed.

Following the coordination and evaluation of the 2005 temporary operations plan results with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, Delaware River Basin Commission, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and other stakeholders, a temporary operational study plan has been developed for the 2006 recreational season (May through October). The plan includes a temporary summer recreational pool elevation of 1365 feet with a pool fluctuation of no more than 5 feet, a minimum flow target downstream, and additional recreational whitewater releases. Meeting the objectives of the plan is directly dependent on seasonal environmental conditions and normal reservoir operations, specifically flood control. The 2006 plan considers meteorological conditions (low precipitation) experienced in 2005 that subsequently resulted in the modification of the 2005 plan throughout the season. The likelihood of the 2006 plan realistically meeting the aforementioned objectives was determined by simulating historic outflows using the following parameters and guidelines:

General plan guidelines

- Pool elevation 1365 Feet NGVD
- Start storing April 1
- Match inflow on weekends while storing
- Sunday releases are reduced or canceled before the Saturday releases are reduced/canceled
- Whitewater releases start at midnight and end at noon
- Whitewater releases are scheduled every other weekend starting with the second weekend in May and ending in September
- Drawdown of any remaining storage to 1300' NGVD will occur in early to mid October
- Whitewater releases are canceled if minimum 500 cfs cannot be met

May - June

- Match inflow on non-whitewater weekends
- Limit pool fluctuations to 5 feet (elevation 1360-1365)
- Target minimum release is 250 cfs; will match inflow down to 50 cfs to maintain pool at 1360
- Maximum whitewater releases will be 1000 cfs in May, 750 cfs in June

July-September

- Constant 1:6 weekday/non whitewater weekend to whitewater weekend augmentation
- Amount of augmentation determined by date and storage
- Maximum whitewater releases will be 750 cfs in July, 750 cfs in August, 750 cfs early September, 1000 cfs mid to late September
- Augmentation rule curve will be followed to allocate water for weekday augmentation and weekend whitewater releases

October

- Minimum release for drawdown will be 144 cfs
- Target flow for Columbus Day weekend (October 7th and 8th) is 1200 cfs

Coordination with resource agencies conducted for the 2002 F.E. Walter Emergency Drought Storage Environmental Assessment was utilized, in part, for the 2006 Environmental Assessment. That project was coordinated with the Delaware River Basin Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 3, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, Pennsylvania Game Commission, and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The 2006 F.E. Walter plan was developed through coordination with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and Delaware River Basin Commission. The public is being afforded the opportunity to continually comment on the 2006 plan and future plans by submitting written comments directly to the Philadelphia District Corps or by providing their comments via the project website at www.nap.usace.army.mil/Projects/FEWalter/index.htm

The 2006 Environmental Assessment has shown that the proposed activity is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any species or the critical habitat of any fish, wildlife or plant, which is designated as endangered or threatened pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, as amended.

Work in waters of the United States, including wetlands, must be in compliance with Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. No work will be performed within the waters of the United States. Therefore, a review of impacts associated with the potential discharge of fill material has not been performed as per Section 404 (b)(1) of the Clean Water Act. The requirements of Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands, are therefore met.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania requires a 401 State water quality certification for any work, which may affect water or waterways in the state. This project entails an operational management change at F.E. Walter Reservoir and does not require any physical instream or riparian work. As a result, a water quality certificate from the Commonwealth is not required.

In accordance with guidelines established under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission determined that the proposed plan would have no effect on archaeological sites or historic structures.

An environmental assessment was prepared in accordance with the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended. This environmental assessment assessed conditions at the project site and evaluated the potential impacts of the 2006 temporary operations plan on existing resources in the immediate and surrounding areas to include: physical, chemical, and biological characteristics of the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystem; endangered and threatened species; hazardous and toxic materials; aesthetics and recreation; cultural resources; and the general needs and welfare of the public. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its partners will continue to pursue additional studies and data collection efforts to evaluate the 2006 plan and to refine potential future plan modifications.

Upon reviewing the 2006 F.E. Walter Temporary Operations Plan Environmental Assessment, I find that potential negative environmental impacts associated with this project will not be significant. Any adverse impacts will be short-term and minor in nature. The 2006 Operations Plan at F.E. Walter is expected to have a positive effect by increasing in-lake fishery habitat, protecting downstream water quality and aquatic habitat, and increasing boating recreational opportunities. Based upon this finding, preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

Date 31 Mar 06



Robert J. Ruch
Lieutenant Colonel, Corps of Engineers
District Commander