



## Dry weather pulls plug on Lehigh River rafters

**By Alan Gregory**  
The Standard-Speaker

White Haven - No rain, no extra water. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' well-publicized plan to turn the Lehigh River into a summer-long haven for whitewater rafting enthusiasts has evaporated. No rain, no extra water.

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The agency that operates the F.E. Walter Dam on the Lehigh near White Haven has canceled this weekend's whitewater release.

It's the second consecutive whitewater weekend to be canceled due to the river's low flow.

Three more whitewater events planned for the coming weeks into early October face the same fate unless soaking rains drench the river's watershed.

Last spring, the corps raised the level of the reservoir behind the dam in Kidder Township by 35 feet, storing an additional 1.75 billion gallons of water in the process.

That was supposed to be enough to provide for 22 whitewater release days from May to October and boost the river's trout fishery by increasing the minimum downstream flow to 150 cubic feet per second.

But this summer's unusually dry weather has reduced flows into the reservoir to a trickle. Thus, the extra water that was supposed to last until early October was used by the first days of August - after only 12 whitewater weekends.

The reservoir is now at its normal summertime level, and the amount of water the corps is sending downstream is only equal to what's coming into the reservoir, about 60-70 cubic feet per second.

No additional water can be stored without lots of rain.

"Future scheduled whitewater releases from the F.E. Walter Dam face the potential of being cancelled unless there is significant rainfall which raises the water level of the reservoir," said corps spokesman Merv Brokke in Philadelphia.

The three remaining scheduled whitewater weekends are Sept. 3-4, Sept. 17-18 and Oct. 1-2, each with a target flow of 750-1,000 cubic feet per second.

The 2005 whitewater plan was developed by the Army agency along with the Delaware River Basin Commission, the state Fish and Boat Commission and the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which manages Lehigh Gorge State Park.

The agencies also got input from anglers, paddling groups, conservation groups and tourism promoters.

The Pocono Mountain Vacation Bureau estimates the value of whitewater releases at \$2.278 million per day.

An estimated 6,200 rafters and boaters travel down the river each release day, benefiting whitewater guide services, bed-and-breakfasts and other businesses that benefit from recreation-based tourism.

The plan also was supposed to help fish and the aquatic insects they eat by maintaining a higher flow below the dam.

Even with the cancellations, though, businesses have already benefited from the whitewater release plan. Only seven releases were held in prior years, Brokke said.

"Public involvement and support in the development and refinement of the current flow management plan have been helpful and will continue to be the key to the success of future plans concerning flow management of the F.E. Walter Dam and recreation along the Lehigh River," Brokke said.

And the corps, he said, encourages the public to continue providing comments on how the dam should be managed.

Ken Powley of White Haven-based Whitewater Challengers Inc. said rafting continues on the river even without additional flow from the dam.

It just means that the bigger rapids created by a whitewater release are not there, he said earlier.

Some people expecting a whitewater ride have cancelled while others have settled for the quieter ride that comes with a lower flow, he said.

On the Net:

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:

<http://www.nap.usace/army.mil/projects/fewalter/index.htm>

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