

September 2013

Lake Morena Water Level Draw Down

Negative impacts on public safety, the environment, recreation and the local economy could occur if the City of San Diego decides to resume reducing the water level at Lake Morena.

Background:

The City of San Diego (City) leases land at Lake Morena to the County of San Diego to operate a park with camping, hiking, fishing, boating, and other recreational opportunities. The City manages the water resource at Lake Morena which feeds into other water reservoirs it manages, Barrett and Otay Lakes. The current water level at Lake Morena is 2990 feet elevation.

Issue:

On February 4, 2013, the City began drawing down the water at Lake Morena, transferring it at a rate of approximately 20 million gallons per day. The water from Lake Morena was being transferred to Barrett and Otay Lakes. After approximately 1 month of the drawdown, it is estimated 600 million gallons of water were transferred. The lake elevation at Lake Morena decreased 4 feet. It was understood that over a 5 month period, the City planned to take the water level at Lake Morena down to 2967 feet elevation, the lowest level in the past decade, and the long-term plan is for the water to remain at this level. This would have been approximately 30 feet lower than the March 2013 level of the lake. However, in March 2013 the City ceased drawing water from Lake Morena.

Year-round, 7-day a week recreational opportunities such as fishing, camping and hiking are available at Lake Morena but not at the other two City lakes.

Impacts:

Public Safety – Drawing down the water level at Lake Morena reduces the available water resources in the backcountry for fighting wildfires.

Environment – Lake Morena contains trout, bass, bluegill, crappie, catfish, trout and carp. During the last water draw down in 2004 at Lake Morena there was a large scale fish kill. Fish need dissolved oxygen (DO) to survive. Generally, a lack of DO occurs when a body of water is smaller and shallower. If the drawdown of the water levels at Lake Morena cause the lake to become smaller in surface acres and shallower in depth, a fish kill can occur. When water is shallow, aquatic vegetation can more readily grow which can also cause algae blooms to occur.

Recreation – Fishermen, boaters, the local community and recreational opportunities will all be impacted negatively if the lake level was lowered and there is a loss of fishing or boat launching capabilities. Lake front cabins and campsites will no longer offer lake views. The loss of recreational opportunities at Lake Morena will impact the local economy and the County of San Diego. Last year, more than 1600 customers who made camping reservations at Lake Morena were residents of the City of San Diego; an estimated 10,000 City customers served.