

# Boats, piers in peril as Lake Kegonsa's rising waters wreak havoc

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As the water level of rain-soaked Lake Kegonsa climbed toward a historic level Tuesday, at least one boat floated out of its shoreline shed.

Longtime lake residents predicted that lifts will soon break with boats still attached to them and they'll float together until they crash into other nearby piers and boats.

"It's a catastrophe," Scott Reiersen said after recent heavy rains caused the lake level to rise so rapidly that it threatened the record high set in 2008 when floods wreaked havoc around the state.

Besides removing their boats and piers, owners of property around Lake Kegonsa were seen sandbagging their homes Tuesday. That followed 5 inches of rain that fell in southern parts of Madison on Friday night and heavy downpours that fell Saturday, Monday and Tuesday.

The rainfall led Dane County Executive Joe Parisi to issue a no-wake order Tuesday for boats on lakes Kegonsa, Monona and Waubesa to protect shoreline property owners from suffering more damage.

The order isn't forcing any changes for Saturday's Shake the Lake fireworks

festival on the shores of Lake Monona because a no-wake order always is in place for the event, which packs the lake with boats. “But it changes daytime plans for the boaters. They can be out there but they have to just putt-putt around,” Dane County Sheriff’s Office spokeswoman Elise Schaffer said.

Rivers and lakes are flooding in many other parts of the state because of an unusual weather situation that dumped copious amounts of rain along a slow-moving frontal boundary that finally exited the state Tuesday, said Justin Palmer, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service.

“We’re used to seeing large storm complexes that dump rain over large areas,” he said. “This was different because localized heavy rains occurred only where the stationary boundary was sitting.”

While lake levels on Monona and Waubesa are high but not dangerous, Lake Kegonsa’s level rose above the 100-year flood level Friday night and moved close to the record of 845.73 feet above sea level set on June 16, 2008, according to U.S. Geological Survey [measurements](#). It was at 845.63 feet at 9 p.m. Tuesday, but there was some question whether it would go much higher because no rain is forecast for the next few days, said Dale Robertson, a USGS research hydrologist in Middleton.

“I’ve seen it high, but I’ve never seen the water this high,” said Dann Barber, 45, who has been installing and removing piers for shoreline property owners on Lake Kegonsa for 30 years. “The water level went up Friday night after all that rain, it went up again Saturday after it poured and then it really went up when it poured (Tuesday). It was so bad that a lady called to say her boat floated out of her boathouse.”

Barber said he has removed 15 flooded piers since Saturday, which was just two weeks after he installed the last one for the season. Besides protecting their property, lakefront owners are removing at least parts of their piers to

keep them from breaking up, floating off and creating navigational hazards. Most property owners have left their lifts in place but have taken their boats on shore, according to Barber.

Normally he works in waders, but the water level is too high for that now, Barber said. "So you just swim out there. It's a royal pain in the butt."

It's an added expense for the homeowners, too. Barber charges \$300 each time he installs or removes a pier but is charging just \$150 for the partial removals, he said.

It's a rude awakening for new property owners, especially if they have other property damage, said Reiersen, who lives on Lake Kegonsa and works at Quam's Marine & Motorsports in Stoughton. "It's pretty traumatic for people who haven't experienced it before," he said.

Reiersen saw boats rising close to the canopies above the lifts where they were docked Tuesday. If the boats are pushed up and into the canopies, he said the buoyancy of the boats can force the lifts out of the ground.

"The lift and boat float away together, the wind pushes them along the shoreline and they tip docks over and scratch boats. I've seen it happen. It's a buzz kill," Reiersen said.

Dane County's dams south of Lake Monona are completely open to help the water flow through and out of Lake Kegonsa but that hasn't kept the water from rising steadily since Friday night, according to John Reimer, the assistant director for the Dane County Land & Water Resources Department. Aquatic plant harvesters also have been in the Yahara River in areas around the lake since last week to remove aquatic plants impeding flow, he said.

"I saw rain coming, the lake levels were rising and it was time to react,"

Reimer said.

It hasn't been enough to stop the flow because the lake has been rising since May, which was the wettest on record.

Similar scenarios are occurring around the state where the National Weather Service has issued flood warnings for rising rivers in 14 counties, including Rock and Columbia. On Monday, Gov. Scott Walker declared a state of emergency in Ashland, Bayfield, Burnett, Douglas and Iron counties due to severe flood damage.

Climate change is a culprit for the torrential downpours, the USGS's Robertson said. "According to the models, this is what we should expect more of," he said.

Diminished water quality can be expected, too, because of raw sewage pouring in the lake from flooded septic systems as well as from farm fields and the streets of nearby cities like Stoughton.

"Nutrients that pour in the lake from septic systems are dwarfed by what's coming off farm fields and the streets and going into the lake," Robertson said.



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