

Canoe portage and boating safety information at the dams

The Wisconsin River

The Wisconsin River is the hardest working river in the nation. From its headwaters on the Wisconsin-Michigan border in Lac Vieux Desert, it falls more than 1,000 feet on its 500-mile journey through the state, before emptying into the Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien.

Since the Ice Age, the mighty river has scoured gorges and cut great rapids and waterfalls, whose roar has been replaced by the hum of turbines and waterwheels at 25 hydroelectric dams. The energy generated by the Wisconsin River each year would supply the electrical needs of every home in Madison for a year.

The Wisconsin, long notorious for devastating floods, is now partially controlled by 21 reservoirs (flowages) on the river. Each reservoir is lowered prior to spring runoff in anticipation of high water when snowmelt and spring rains occur.

Conditions vary greatly

As with most man-made flowages, some areas on the river are relatively shallow and quickly become turbulent on windy days. Bottom conditions and depths vary considerably. Boaters are urged to become familiar with the body of water before recreating on the flowage.



Open to the public

CWPCo owns approximately 8,000 acres of land surrounding the Wisconsin River. These lands are generally open to the public for hiking, fishing, hunting, nature observation, skiing and other recreational activities. Off-road vehicles, camping or the use of fire outside of public parks are not permitted.

Federal license

Our dams are operated under licenses issued by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). These licenses require us to operate within specified water elevation limits and with certain environmental and recreational considerations. Specific questions pertaining to our licenses may be directed to our office at 715-422-3927.

Important information for boaters

A flashing red rotating light is a warning that a floodgate is open. All boaters should always stay at least 300 feet upstream from the dam. For added safety, a restraining cable with orange floats and regulatory warning buoys are installed during the typical boating season. The cable is installed after spring breakup, and is removed in October. This cable spans the upstream powerhouse intake area and the gate



section. Anchoring to the cable, except for emergencies, is prohibited.

Similar cable and floats have been installed just downstream from the turbine discharge area. These hydro units are remote controlled and can come on without warning. Safe boating procedures are a must, especially near dams!

As boaters approach the dam, they will see warning signs that identify the structure as a dam and a danger area. Other signs above the dam will indicate the best takeout and portage sites.

Boaters may occasionally encounter floating debris which has come from upriver or which broke loose from the shoreline. Boaters should always exercise caution when traveling high speeds on the river as debris may become exposed where it normally has not been encountered before.

