

## Whitefish Lake water level nears record low

By MATT BALDWIN Whitefish Pilot | Posted: Wednesday, September 9, 2015 12:30 am

The mud flats along the shore of Monk's Bay show the reality of what is now the driest summer on record in the Flathead.

The water level of Whitefish Lake is on pace to recede to all-time low levels, exposing vast shorelines of mud and rock, and leaving docks nearly grounded on dry land.

Whitefish Lake Institute director Mike Koopal expects that record low elevation mark will be shattered this fall if conditions persist.

Brian Sullivan at F&H Surveying has voluntarily collected lake elevation data for the past 58 years. On Aug. 12, the lake was at 2,996.46 feet, which is only 0.18 on an inch above the record low set in 1967.

The mean high water elevation is 3,000.63 feet.

Koopal also expects the year to come close to the record minimum water level fluctuation of 2.21 feet set in 1977. The mean fluctuation is 3.81 feet.

Charlie Abell has seen his share of summers on Whitefish Lake. He says the low water this year is easily visible from his home near City Beach.

"It's the lowest I remember it being this time of year," he said last week.

"The water never came up in the spring. When the ice went off, that's about as high as it was all year."

Near his house he says a person could walk "a long ways out" before having to swim. While at the mouth of the Whitefish River paddlers are having to portage around the shallow water.

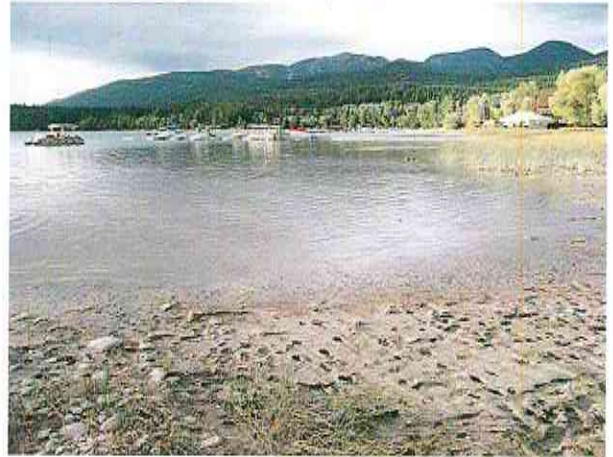
"It's pretty sad," Abell said. "I sure hope we get some moisture this winter."

A short skip away to Monk's Bay, Koel Abell has already pulled his dock from the water — the earliest he's ever towed it to shore.

"The shallower, the harder it is put get them out," he said.

Charlie described Monk's Bay as a "mud puddle."

"Boats can really churn it up right now," he said.



Whitefish Lake

Mud flats in Monk's Bay are revealed as the water level of Whitefish Lake approaches an all-time low this summer.

Farther up the lake, Jim Stack is having similar concerns with his boat lift.

“Our shore station is on a flexible power conduit,” he explained. “It is at the maximum length right now and we only have about 1.5 feet more water elevation before we won’t be able to get the boat off. This is the lowest we’ve seen it in our 28 years on the lake.”

The spring started with low snowpack levels and a serious lack of rain feeding the lake, with both contributing factors in setting what is the lowest high water elevation for the lake in the past 34 years.

The amount of water being pumped from the lake for municipal use and irrigation also is a factor in the low levels, Koopal said.

About 25 percent of the municipal water supply is pumped from the lake, with the other 75 percent coming from the Haskill Basin watershed.

More than 35 million gallons for water was pumped from the lake in August to feed the city’s municipal water supply. That’s “well above average” but not a record, said Whitefish utility operations supervisor Greg Acton.

July pumping was about normal with 17 million gallons drawn from the lake.

According to city data, water usage in July and August this year was at the highest level since 2007. Acton expects the city will set an annual water supply record by the end of the year because usage in both May and June was well above average, as well.

A few other sources have water rights to pump from the lake. Whitefish Lake Golf Club and Mountain Harbor have the two largest shares of water rights, other than the city.

Koopal is waiting on more data before he can draw and conclusions about the impact of the low water level on the biology of the lake.

“The hardest part of science is waiting for all of the data to come in to tell the story,” he said. “But we do know this is a very unique year for Whitefish Lake when you consider nutrient availability, warmer temperatures, and lower lake elevations.”