

2025 Little Bitterroot Lake Association (LBLA)

NEWSLETTER No. 4



LAKE WATER LEVEL

Greetings,

This NEWSLETTER is an update on some of the action/interactions LBLA leadership has had with Congressman Zinke's Senior Staff, Our County Commissioners (primary lead Randy Brodehl), Representative Tom Millett, Flathead Planning and Zoning, Flathead Indian Irrigation Project and others including the Daily Interlake Newspaper.

You will see BELOW:

- 1) Our PROPOSAL to Flathead Indian Irrigation Project (FIIP) that outlines how to fix our water level. Answer: Better FIIP MANAGEMENT. This was sent to Congressman Zinke and Commissioner Randy Brodehl.
- 2) A link to a commissioner's meeting organized and presided over by Commissioner Brodehl (super job) that detailed our problems. The meeting had representatives from FIIP, Congressman Zinke's office, Sen. Sheehy staff, Sen. Daines staff, LBLA, the Press and many more!
- 3) A copy of a front-page Daily Interlake article that discusses our situation.
- 4) Commissioner Brad Abell interview with KGEZ on - Little Bitterroot Lake Level

We began a program two years ago that explained the Dam (See Numerous Website NEWSLETTERS) , Flathead Indian Irrigation Project, our LBLA action, and various alliances we were building (Political – County, State, and Federal).

We have educated, acted, gotten attention and now proposed a solution.

LBLA has an excellent reputation and means to be an honest transparent, and capable force for improvement in all aspects of our lake. Thank You for your support and commitment.

Respectfully,

Capt. Dan Handlin President, LBLA

See our Website and Previous NEWSLETTERS! <https://www.littlebitterrootlakeassoc.org/index2.html>

See in this NEWSLETTER a **WARNING** On Using Our North Boat Launch

A PROPOSAL by Little Bitterroot Lake Association (LBLA) for Flathead Indian Irrigation Project (FIIP)

*Built by LBLA and Submitted to
Congressman Zinke and Commissioner Brodehl for ACTION*

- 1) LBLA Requests the FIIP enter into an Agreement with the Little Bitterroot Lake Association(LBLA) by *Implementing a 3-year carry-over plan in the Camas District.* (As Described Below)**
- 2) For Reference, Please See Section 2 (below) - Snowpack Analysis and how it affects LBL - with a Suggestion for Change in the Management of LBL Outflow by Flathead Indian Irrigation Project (FIIP) based on Snowpack data and measured inflow of LBL.**

Summary

Little Bitterroot Lake Association (LBLA) suggests FIIP, LBLA, Flathead County and the Office of Congressman Zinke establish a better water management plan for LBL and that this Agreement be a part of that plan.

LBLA acknowledges FIIP's right to withdraw at full pool approximately 25,000 acre-feet from Little Bitterroot Lake and in recent years water level has not supported transference of a reasonable volume for irrigation.

LBLA also recognizes that the lake is fed by natural recharge (snowmelt, streamflow, and groundwater), which appears to have been low in recent years (i.e., Hand Creek SNOTEL station data 2015-2025).

We consider the volume being transferred out of the lake by FIIP each year to be excessive given the modest snowpack totals in uplands contributing runoff to the lake.

We believe that a 3-year reservoir management schedule described in FIIP's 2008 Operations and Maintenance Guidelines Manual should be implemented in the Camas Irrigation District beginning in 2026. The guidelines have been in place for 17 years, yet there is no evidence that a prudent 3-year plan has been implemented. The time is now to do so.

1) Agreement:

LBLA requests FIIP Implement a 3-year Carry-Over Plan in the CAMAS District as follows:

- a.) Continue to capture as much water as possible in Little Bitterroot Lake year-round. For now, we need to recharge the reservoir by taking the absolute minimum water necessary.
- b.) Closely monitor SNOTEL and other publicly available water supply forecast information pertinent to the Camas Irrigation District, including information on the Little Bitterroot Lake basin.
- c.) Periodically deliver reports regarding the Camas area snowpack and water supply at Camas Irrigation District meetings.
- d.) Install a flow monitoring device in lower Herrig Creek that is accessible from Pleasant Valley Road, regularly record flow observations at the site, and make the record of observations available to the public.
- e.) Implement the 3-year water budget and carry-over schedule in the Camas Irrigation District as per the current Operations and Maintenance Guidelines manual.
- f.) Reduce the volume of water transferred out of Little Bitterroot Lake in coming years by (at a minimum) an amount consistent with reduced natural recharge as estimated by SNOTEL data and other relevant water supply information.
- g.) Close the gates at Little Bitterroot Dam at the close of each irrigation season (September 15th) and cease off-season transfers to Hubbart Reservoir in order to retain a significant volume in the lake (winter carry-over) consistent with a 3-year planning schedule.
- h.) Seek to ensure proper maintenance is applied to minimize water lost in the flow from LBL to the CAMAS irrigation system.

For reference – Agreements are common to solve water issues - An Agreement was negotiated between the EKI and the Government to ensure a reasonable lake level for Flathead Lake. "...EKI said that the water levels would remain around full pool after an agreement had been reached with the Secretary of the Interior, allowing for a 45% reduction in the minimum outflows from the lake." *Daily Interlake*

**No such agreement or regulations ensure the viability of Little Bitterroot Lake's reservoir capacity. LBL needs an agreement to protect the dammed water source. Right now, the LBL dam is basically dry.*

2) A Snowpack Analysis and how it affects LBL - with a Suggestion for Change in the Management of LBL Outflow by Flathead Indian Irrigation Project (FIIP) based on Snowpack data and measured inflow of LBL.

There has been a “run” on the bank over the last decade by FIIP at LBL. As of today, LBL is within inches of the Dam’s bottom (bankrupt). This is because water (money) has been run out of the lake by FIIP without regard to ensuring the viability of the reservoir (bank).

At Little Bitterroot Lake (LBL), for the last decade Flathead Indian Irrigation Project (FIIP) has managed a “run on the bank” and depleted LBL to the bottom of the 25,000 acre-ft. reservoir capacity.

For now, per item “a”, we need to recharge the reservoir by taking the absolute minimum water necessary.

For the long-term we need a plan to protect the Dam’s water capacity for irrigation, river flow, recreation, and safety. As item “f.” in our agreement states: FIIP would reduce the volume of water transferred out of Little Bitterroot Lake in coming years by (at a minimum) an amount consistent with reduced natural recharge as estimated by SNOTEL data and other relevant water supply information.

Basically, the long-term plan would decrease outflow by at least the averaged amount of “below median” Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) as measured at the Hand Creek Station (HCS) and the Little Bitterroot Subbasin (LBS).

For example: If the average SWE at HCS and LBS is 25% below median then FIIP would decrease LBL outflow by at least 25% for the year.

Data Analysis

This “Analysis” studies Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) data for Lower Flathead Basin (HUC-8), Little Bitterroot Subbasin, and Hand Creek Station from 2015 to 2025 (11 years). Little Bitterroot Lake lies within both basin polygons and Hand Creek is the nearest station to the lake.

Snow water equivalent in the Little Bitterroot Subbasin was below the median for nearly two-thirds of the past decade, while SWE in the Lower Flathead Basin was below median for one-third. Hand Creek Station SWE was below median for almost half of the decade.

Little Bitterroot Lake Data

SWE for the Little Bitterroot Subbasin over the past decade was...

- Below median 7 years (63%)
- Above median 1 year (9%)
- Above and below median 3 years (27%)

SWE at the Hand Creek Station over the past decade was...

- Below median 5 years (45%)
- Above median 1 year (9%)
- Above and below median 5 years (45%)

Flathead Lake Comparison Data

SWE for the Lower Flathead Basin over the past decade was...

- Below the median 4 years (36%)
- Above median 2 years (18%)
- Above and below median 5 years (45%)

** Snowpack data is collected daily at SNOTEL stations. SWE is the amount of water yielded by the snowpack. The median SWE is a reference calculated for each basin or station using a 30-year block of data, in this case from 1991-2020. The larger Lower Flathead Basin (2009 sq mi.) utilizes data from seven SNOTEL stations distributed around the region, including in the Salish Range, Mission Mountains, and others. The smaller Little Bitterroot Subbasin (615 sq mi.) utilizes data from just two SNOTEL stations (Blacktail, Bassoo Pk). Hand Creek sits at an elevation of 5054'.*

Request a response to this Proposed Agreement no later than Sept 25, 2025.

For continued discussion and review please contact:

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President, LBLA

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612 251-3778



See the Two Steel Rusted Dam Doors - The Steel Bar that comes out the Top of the Doors connects to the Yellow Cranks (see picture in this NEWSLETTER)

Commissioner's Meeting RECORDING July 22, 2025 - Little Bitterroot Lake Level

A link to a commissioner's meeting organized and presided over by Commissioner Brodehl (super job) that detailed our problems. The meeting had representatives from FIIP, BIA, Congressman Zinke's, Sen. Daines, Sen. Sheehy, CAMAS irrigators, Flathead County, the Press, LBLA BOD and many more!

Directions to Listen to Meeting

- Visit the link below
- Forward to -1:06 REMAINING in meeting

<https://media.avcaptureall.cloud/meeting/d85ddc32-eedb-4c39-8144-46bc86241d56>



Time stamp is 36:30 minutes



Dam entrance Picture taken August 29, 2023 * UPDATE – Aug 2025 looks the same...Water El. 3899.0

NEWSPAPER Article on Little Bitterroot Lake

July 24, 2025

By HANNAH SHIELDS

Daily Inter Lake/Report for America

Flathead County commissioners on Tuesday demanded answers from the Bureau of Indian Affairs on why the water level at Little Bitterroot Lake has remained low the past two years. In emails sent to the federal agency ahead of the meeting, commissioners alleged water levels at Little Bitterroot Lake are insufficient for boat egress at both of the county's boat ramps. Commissioners also outlined concerns about inadequate water supply to meet irrigation needs and the potential effect on bull trout and other fish species.

Chuck Stephens, an irrigator in the Camas Water District, told commissioners on Tuesday this is the first time in eight years he's struggled to pull water for irrigation.

"The water is just about dry," Stephens said. "I'm out of water today."

The Camas district supplies water to about 13,000 irrigated acres in the northwest portion of the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project. It is served by four reservoirs: Little Bitterroot Lake, Hubbart Reservoir, Upper Dry Fork Reservoir and Lower Dry Fork Reservoir.

Little Bitterroot Lake is the largest of the four reservoirs with a storage capacity of about 26,400 acre feet, said Nick Belcourt, a spokesperson for both the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project.

The Little Bitterroot Basin watershed is low in elevation and unreliable in nature, he said. There's been insufficient snow and rain runoff over the last five years to fill the watershed and meet irrigation needs.

"We've been struggling to deliver water in the Camas division for the past three years," he said.

Without an influx of water coming in, the outflow gate is left partially open all year to take what water is available. In some years, there hasn't been enough runoff to refill the lake, Belcourt said. "Typically, in a low flow scenario, we operate the Little Bitterroot Lake as a flow-through reservoir," Belcourt said.

"Without any input flows coming in, we only take what water can be produced out of the reservoir."

Stakeholders from federal, state and local agencies filled the seats during the meeting. Representatives from U.S. Rep. Ryan Zinke, R-Mont., and U.S. Sens. Steve Daines and Tim Sheehy's offices were among those in attendance.

Commissioner Randy Brodehl verified with each stakeholder that neither the Bureau of Indian Affairs nor the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project notified them about the low water level at Little Bitterroot Lake.

"Why hasn't there been any concern addressed with the different groups that are represented?" Brodehl asked Delcourt. "That'd be a tough question for me," he replied. "I am acting [project manager]. The current leadership all quit... I'm the last one standing."

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS sent a letter to the U.S. Department of the Interior in May, asking to turn management of the four reservoirs over to the Bureau of Reclamation.

"In recent years, maintenance of the system has declined dramatically," the letter read. Commissioners listed several maintenance issues in the letter, such as broken stream gauges, faulty floodgates and leaking canals. "It is clear the [Bureau of Indian Affairs] lacks both the resources and specialized personnel to meet the system's technical needs," the letter read.

The Department of Interior sent a response last week, saying it would work with the commissioners to address their concerns. However, the letter did not respond to their request to transfer management to the Bureau of Reclamation. The federal department maintained that "snowpack levels have been below average for several years," according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service. "Hence, reduced snowmelt volume restricts [the Bureau of Indian Affairs'] ability to fill the four reservoirs."

The Flathead Indian Irrigation Project was authorized by Congress in 1904 between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Construction of the project was mostly completed in 1924, and the latter bureau assumed full control of it. Federal funding was provided under Section 3211 of the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act of 2016 and the Montana Water Rights Protection Act of 2020 for maintenance improvement and repairs of the irrigation project.

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KGEZ radio interview with Commissioner Brad Abell

Subject: Little Bitterroot Lake Level and More...

Visit link below to listen

https://flatheadcounty.gov/department-directory/commissioners-office/public_information_office/article/12620



WARNING on North Boat Launch

- We petitioned the County, and they dug out the North Boat Launch last spring...52 ft backhoe and three dump trucks and STILL it needs work
- Caution shallow water 150 to 50 ft from launch...approach with PROPS UP!
- No power loading please...If possible crank it on your trailer
- Muddy after the concrete and between the launch and boat dock – You may lose a shoe/boot
- Have a spotter
- Talk to others who have used the launch – CAREFUL PLEASE!
- The South Launch is extremely shallow

Report – Dam Update

Before the Dam was built in 1916-17 (enlarged in 1918) LBL existed at a lower lake level. The Dam built up a level of water capacity that could be managed. The purpose was primarily for irrigation. If the dam ever failed, the lake would return to a level much like it was in 1915. If the lake water was mis-managed (with low snowpack) the level of our lake would also be at its pre-dam construction level.

The Dam's water height is 8.5ft tall.

8.5ft of water measured over the entire 3,000-acre lake is 25,000acre-ft ($3,000\text{-acre} \times 8.5\text{ft} = 25,000\text{ acre-ft}$).

On Jun 11th, 2023, we had 49% Dam Reservoir Capacity in the lake, (measured elevation was 3902.4 Above Sea Level – by CSKT) which is approx. 12,500acre-ft of water. As of August 29, 2023, the water level was bottomed out inside the dam as it is today.

Here are pictures from a Tour “inside and outside” the Dam. Note: FIIP manages the Dam doors. The doors are only about 3 ft tall and located at the bottom of the 8.5 ft Dam.



The Dam at the South End of the Lake - circa 1916 - 1918



View of the Right Dam Door



Cranks that Open and Close the Steel Doors inside the Dam



Water entering the Dam (Very Low)



3906.5 Above Sea Level (ASL) Plaque from 1918



CSKT Measuring Instruments -- In 2022,CSKT installed a monitoring system on LBL. Anyone can view the lakes water elevation - Go to portal at - <https://cskt.aquaticinformatics.net/>

Just change the Select Parameter field from "Discharge" to "Lake/res elevation."

Little Bitterroot Lake Forest Health Targeted Implementation Plan 2022 -2026

This is the last opportunity to apply for possible cost assistance!

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is looking for landowners interested in doing fuel reduction and improving forest health in the targeted area outlined in pink on the map below. This is the **last year** to apply for possible cost assistance to help with fuel reduction and forest health projects in this area. Please contact the Flathead County NRCS office at 406-752-4242 ex. 3 for more information and to apply by the application deadline of October 30th, 2025.





Little Bitterroot Lake Association
PO Box 1003
Marion, MT 59925

**This NEWSLETTER is our
“Water Level EDITION”
Thank You for Your Support!**

<<First>> <<Last>>
<<Address>>
<<City>>, <<State>> <<Zip>>
<<Country>>

NAME _____
CONTRIBUTION AMOUNT _____
MAILING ADDRESS _____
LAKE ADDRESS _____
EMAIL ADDRESS _____
PHONE NUMBER _____
CELL _____
COMMENTS AND IDEAS _____
I would be interested in serving on the Board of Directors _____
I would be interested in occasionally volunteering my time for projects undertaken by this Association (water testing, county meeting attendance, writing and editing material, research etc.) _____

PLEASE DETACH AND MAIL BACK TO: LBLA PO BOX 1003 MARION, MT. 59925

ALL HANDS-ON DECK Tax Deductible CONTRIBUTION FORM

