

Why Does Lake Berryessa Exist?

Many people still think that the lake was created as a water recreation resource. This is not true. The Solano Project, which includes the Monticello Dam, Putah Diversion Dam, and the Putah South Canal was created primarily for agricultural irrigation. The secondary purposes were for municipal (drinking water) and industrial uses (later for brewing Budweiser beer) in Solano County. The federal government never expected the lake to be used for recreation. The recreational benefits were considered a bonus not a goal. Napa County gave up all rights to the use of Lake Berryessa water. Only small amounts are used to supply the residential developments, such as the Berryessa Highlands and others, around the lake. Lake Berryessa supplies water to Benicia, Fairfield, Vacaville, Vallejo, Rio Vista, Suisun City, and Travis Air Force Base.

The United States Bureau of Reclamation is the owner of the Solano Project which includes Lake Berryessa, Monticello Dam, Lake Solano, Putah Diversion Dam, Putah South Canal, and Terminal Reservoir. The Solano Project was built and funded by Reclamation (federal government), but the original loan has been fully paid off by the Solano County Water Agency (SCWA, www.scwa2.com/). The Solano Project is a locally managed project, but Reclamation has the ultimate oversight responsibility, and conducts periodic inspections of all the facilities. SCWA holds the master contract with Reclamation for the operation of the Project. SCWA then contracts the Solano Irrigation District (SID, www.sidwater.org/) to assist with the daily operations.

Lake Berryessa is the federal reservoir that provides much of the water for Solano County farms and cities. This water is conveyed in the Putah South Canal, which ends its long journey at Terminal Reservoir. There is a link between Lake Berryessa and Terminal Reservoir, despite the 25 miles separating them. Water pools there so it can be pumped to Vallejo and Benicia. SCWA has a long-term Operation, Maintenance, and Replacement Agreement (OMRA) with Reclamation from the buoy line in front of Monticello Dam down to the Terminal Reservoir.

The OMRA allows SCWA to store and release agricultural and municipal water for Solano County. In turn, SCWA funds all OMRA projects on the Solano Project and pays for all SID's expenses related to operation and maintenance of the Solano Project. SCWA is also the primary water rights holder for most of the water rights on Lake Berryessa. SCWA conducts extensive monitoring of flows, stage levels, reservoirs levels, weather data, and other operations-related activities for the Solano Project. SCWA is also the water wholesaler for the Solano Project, with long-term water rights agreements with Solano Irrigation District, Maine Prairie Water District, UC Davis, Vacaville, Fairfield, Suisun City, Vallejo, and Benicia.

On April 27, 1956, the 84th United States Congress, 2nd session, approved bill S-2775, which named the reservoir behind Monticello Dam. Until then, the reservoir had been referred to as "Monticello Reservoir." From then on, however, it would be known as Lake Berryessa.

Lake Berryessa was removed from the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument designation before the law was signed by President Obama because it is not "nationally significant" enough to rate a "National Monument" designation. It is not even an especially important environmental resource. This is a man-made lake that did not exist before 1958. It is an agricultural resource, drinking water resource, and a recreation resource – in that order. The lands around it have been significantly disturbed by construction and grazing for decades. Ecologically, the land is interesting but not critical to the existence of any species.

The water has no significant indigenous species, although some native fish from the old Putah Creek – Town of Monticello days still survive. Fish are stocked in Lake Berryessa by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife for human recreation – not for conservation.

Lake Berryessa is not another natural “lake in the country”. It is a major economic, social, and recreation resource in an urban-proximate setting. Lake Berryessa clearly falls into the Rural Developed Setting category in the government’s own Water and Land Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Users’ Handbook (WALROS).

www.lakeberryessanews.com/resources/References-PDFs/2011-WALROS-Handbook.pdf

During the early period of the lake's existence there was significant controversy as to who should manage the lake and what the vision of its future should include. They ranged from Napa County management planning for seven resort areas serving 2.8 million visitors per year, to State Park control, to the National Park Service plans for 25 recreation areas around the lake, including the whole east side, serving up to 12 million visitors a year. The political conflict details of this period are documented in my book, "Policy and Politics Betray the People: The Lake Berryessa Saga, 1958-2020".

www.amazon.com/Policy-Politics-Betray-People-Berryessa-ebook/dp/B08MFSQDBR/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=peter+kilkus&qid=1604774826&sr=8-1