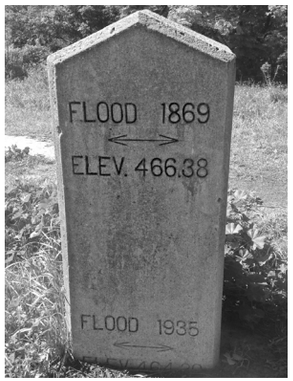
MAJOR FLOODS ON THE COLORADO RIVER

Major floods have occurred in the lower Colorado River basin in every decade since the 1840s, including:



JULY 1869

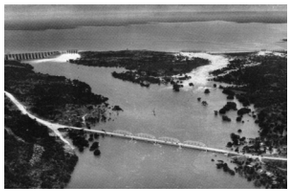
The 1869 flood is the flood of record on the Colorado River at Austin, Bastrop and La Grange. A concrete marker in downtown Austin shows where the Colorado River crested at 51 feet.

DECEMBER 1913

The 1913 flood is the flood of record on the Colorado River at Smithville, Columbus, Wharton and Bay City. Floodwaters joined the Colorado and Brazos rivers below Columbus, forming a single river 65 miles wide and flooding half a million acres.

W00778

W01106



1930s

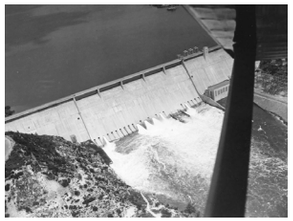
Major floods occurred in 1935, 1936 and 1938. The 1935 flood is the flood of record on the Llano River at Llano. It destroyed bridges in the Hill Country and cut Austin in half. The 1938 flood is the flood of record on the San Saba River at San Saba. LCRA opened a record 22 floodgates at the newly completed Buchanan Dam to pass the 1938 flood.

SEPTEMBER 1952

The 1952 flood is the flood of record on the Pedernales River at Johnson City, where it washed out the U.S. 281 bridge. Lakes LBJ and Marble Falls rose to their all-time highs at Wirtz and Starcke dams. Inflows from the Pedernales and Colorado rivers made Lake Travis rise 57 feet in 14 hours. The flood came in the middle of a decade-long historic drought, and Lake Travis was so low it held the entire flood without opening a single floodgate at Mansfield Dam.

W00246

W00885



MAY 1957

A series of storms in spring 1957 brought more than 3 million acre-feet of runoff to the Colorado River basin and finally broke the historic drought of the 1940s and 1950s. LCRA opened eight floodgates at Buchanan Dam and a record six floodgates at Mansfield Dam. Lake Travis rose to its second highest level of 707.38 feet msl on May 18.

DECEMBER 1991

Heavy December rains caused extensive flooding upstream and downstream of the Highland Lakes. Lake Buchanan rose to its all-time high of 1,021.4 feet msl – about 1 foot above the Buchanan Dam spillway. Lake Travis rose to its all-time high of 710.44 feet msl – less than 4 feet below the Mansfield Dam spillway. LCRA opened six floodgates at Buchanan Dam, five floodgates at Wirtz Dam and five floodgates at Mansfield Dam.

W01314

W01363

JUNE 1997

Intense rainfall caused a basin-wide flash flood that pushed the level of Lake Travis to 705.11 feet msl – its third-highest level on record. LCRA opened all 10 gates at Wirtz Dam for the first time since the 10th gate was added to the dam in 1971. LCRA opened six floodgates at Buchanan Dam and four floodgates at Mansfield Dam.

JUNE 2007

An extremely intense storm that dropped 18 inches of rain in six hours in the Marble Falls area caused flash flooding from Lake Buchanan to Lake Travis. LCRA opened four floodgates at Buchanan Dam, four floodgates at Wirtz Dam and four floodgates at Mansfield Dam. Lake Travis temporarily held the water from the flash flood, minimizing flooding in Austin and other downstream communities. Lake Travis rose to 701.52 feet msl.

W01013

MAY 2016

After years of record-breaking drought, a prolonged rainy period refilled the Highland Lakes. In May 2016, floodgate operations occurred simultaneously at Mansfield and Buchanan dams for the first time in almost nine years. LCRA opened four floodgates at Buchanan Dam, two floodgates at Wirtz Dam and four floodgates at Mansfield Dam. Lake Travis rose to 692.17 feet msl.

AUGUST 2017

Hurricane Harvey churned along the coastal plains of Texas for four days and brought major flooding to the Colorado River from Bastrop to Matagorda Bay. The river jumped its banks and found new flow paths through Columbus and Wharton, causing severe damage. However, the heavy rainfall did not extend to the Hill Country, and no flood releases were made from the Highland Lakes.

OCTOBER 2018

Back-to-back floods caused significant flooding throughout the Highland Lakes. Areas along the Llano River and lakes LBJ and Marble Falls were especially hard hit. The FM 2900 bridge at Kingsland was destroyed. LCRA opened eight floodgates at Buchanan Dam, 10 floodgates at Wirtz Dam and four floodgates at Mansfield Dam. Lake Travis rose to 704.39 feet msl – its fifth highest level on record.

All timeline photos: LCRA Corporate Archives