

Circular From WOE

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Panama Canal - Successive Draught Restriction Adjustments

Amidst Water Supply Shortage to Gatun Lake

The Panama Canal Authority (ACP) has been closely monitoring the water levels of Gatun Lake, a vital component in determining the maximum authorised draught for vessels transiting the Neopanamax Locks.

In response to the present and projected levels of the lake, the ACP has issued a series of advisories announcing successive draught adjustments. The ACP's recent advisories reveal a consistent pattern of decreasing maximum authorised draught over the past few months.

The most recent [advisory, dated 29th May 2023](#), states that the planned draught adjustment scheduled for 30th May 2023 has been postponed. Instead, the maximum authorised draught of 13.56 meters (44.5 feet) Tropical Fresh Water of Gatun Lake (TFW) will remain in effect until 12th June 2023. This delay is attributed to recent rainfall in the Panama Canal watershed, which has temporarily improved the water levels.

As stated in this advisory, it is important to note that the maximum authorised draughts for the upcoming weeks are subject to changes. Specifically, on 13th June 2023, the maximum authorised draught must not exceed 13.41 meters (44.0 feet), and on 25th June 2023, the limit will be 13.26 meters (43.5 feet) TFW.

The decision to adjust the draught results from the declining levels of Gatun Lake. In an [advisory dated 13th April 2023](#), the ACP highlighted its efforts to minimise draught restrictions by implementing water-saving measures. However, the lake's water supply has remained significantly below average due to insufficient precipitation, leading to the gradual reduction of the maximum authorised draughts.

These draught adjustments directly affect vessels transiting the Neopanamax Locks. Vessels arriving with draught exceeding the authorised limits may be required to adjust their cargo or offload some of it to ensure safe passage. The ACP typically provides advance notice of draught reductions, usually with at least four weeks' notice.

However, the waiting time for vessels can vary based on factors such as booking status and the number of

vessels awaiting transit. Therefore, vessels planning to transit at or near the maximum authorised draught need to consider the possibility of further draught reductions during the waiting period.

The ACP's diligent monitoring of Gatun Lake's water levels and timely communication of draught adjustments demonstrates its commitment to maintaining safe and efficient operations. The ACP recognises the variability in lake levels and regularly updates shipping agents, owners, and operators to help them plan their transit accordingly.

The Panama Canal has encountered similar challenges in the past, particularly during the 1997-1998 and 2015-2016 El Niño events. The 1997-1998 El Niño event resulted in an extended dry season, leading to decreased water levels in Gatun Lake. To ensure the safety of vessel transit, the ACP implemented draught restrictions because of the limited water resources and to mitigate potential risks.

Likewise, the 2015-2016 El Niño event brought reduced rainfall and water scarcity to the region, prompting the ACP to take precautionary measures. Draught restrictions were once again implemented following low water levels in Gatun Lake, thus ensuring the uninterrupted operation of the canal.

Considering the successive draught adjustments and potential impact on shipping operations, it is advisable for vessel owners and operators planning to transit through the Panama Canal to stay informed about the latest draught restrictions and updates.

This information can be obtained through a local protective agent, referring to [the official website of the Panama Canal Authority](#), or directly contacting them. These channels provide the most accurate and up-to-date information on any restrictions or adjustments that may affect shipping in the Panama Canal and help mitigate the consequences of vessels arriving with draught exceeding the authorised limits.

ACP's published Advisory to Shipping can be found [here](#).

Members requiring further guidance should contact the [Loss Prevention Department](#).

Source of Information: The West of England P&I Club