

Bighorn River rises with high releases from dam

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Releases from Yellowtail Dam into the Bighorn River are at their highest level in more than a decade, and some low-lying areas along the banks of the river — famous for its trout fishing — are being swamped.

Water is flowing from the dam at the rate of nearly 13,000 cubic feet per second. That's the highest level since 1995, when releases hit 14,000 cubic feet per second before declining. The 70-mile-long Bighorn Lake straddles the Montana-Wyoming line.

Water levels in Bighorn Lake have been rising since early June, when the pace of snowmelt in Wyoming mountains picked up.

"We had a cool spring that kept everything up in the mountains late into the season," said Tim Felchle, Montana reservoir operations chief for the Bureau of Reclamation. "Near the first part of July things are usually over. That leaves us with a narrow window to manage water."

As of Thursday, water levels were 5.6 feet into the lake's 17-foot flood pool. Felchle said he expects it to rise another foot or foot and a half.

The flood pool is storage that's available above the full level of a reservoir's conservation pool that can hold the excess in high-water years.

Inflows into the lake had fallen back to just over 16,000 cubic feet per second on Thursday, down about 500 from earlier in the week.

The Bighorn River system includes Bighorn Lake as well as Boysen and Buffalo Bill reservoirs in Wyoming.

Inflows at Boysen are still about 3,000 cubic feet per second above outflows. The reservoir is 99.4 percent full. Buffalo Bill is about 91 percent full and inflows are about 300 cubic feet per second above outflows.