

Why can't we swim in the lakes?

The answer can be complicated

By JOANNA DODDER The Daily Courier

PRESCOTT As Arizona's dry heat intensifies and peaks in June, more and more people seek refuge by taking a plunge outdoors.

Lakes usually are the only public place deep enough to jump into in the Prescott area by June, since the small swimming holes in creeks drop to the point that people are lucky to get their bums wet.

In the not-so-old days of Prescott, until the 1960s or so, people had a variety of tempting options, such as the cool clear waters of Lynx Lake, or the two public pools on private property in the Granite Dells.

But things have changed.

The outdoor pool in Prescott is gone, after the YMCA replaced it with an indoor pool.

The Granite Dells pools that were in more natural settings are gone.

The City of Prescott and the Prescott National Forest own all the lakes around here Goldwater, Lynx, Granite Basin, Watson and Willow and neither allows swimming in any of them.

"I get comments on a regular basis, 'Why can't we have swimming in the lakes?'" Prescott Parks and Recreation Director Jim McCasland said.

"It's one of our biggest complaints on our forest, 'We only have a few lakes and we can't swim in them,'" said Debbie Maneely, Prescott National Forest public affairs officer.

Some of the Prescott-area lakes are shallow with such muddy bottoms that most people wouldn't want to get in them anyway, such as Granite Basin and Mingus on the forest, and Willow on city land. And Watson has a particularly strong smell of algae.

But others, particularly Goldwater and Lynx, appear quite inviting.

Officials from both agencies can offer plenty of reasons why all the lakes are closed to swimming, mainly centering around bacteria problems as people tend to relieve themselves underwater.

However, neither agency has produced direct proof that bacteria such as coliform has caused problems.

McCasland said the city experimented with reinstating swimming at Goldwater and Watson one year around 2000, but it didn't take long for water quality tests to reveal coliform problems.

But with the lakes manager out of town this week, McCasland couldn't locate the records on that experiment.

The coliform doesn't hurt people if they catch and eat fish from the lakes, he said.

All the lakes in this area are just too small for swimming without creating a bacteria problem, he said. Part of the problem stems from the fact that the small and intermittent creeks that feed the lakes don't flush them out enough to cleanse the water, McCasland said.



Courier/Les Stukenberg A duck seems oblivious to the submerged 'no swimming' sign at Goldwater Lake. The City of Prescott owns the lake, even though it's surrounded by the Prescott National Forest south of Prescott. It's one of the clearest lakes in the region. City officials said they tried to let people swim in it one year but had to outlaw it because of bacteria.

"These lakes are standing water for most of the year, so it creates health issues with coliform," agreed Bruce Fahrni, recreation staff officer on the Prescott Forest.

Northern Arizona's two other national forests have different policies.

The Kaibab National Forest doesn't allow swimming in any of its lakes. All but one are City of Williams drinking water sources, Susan Brown at the front desk said. She wasn't sure why the agency doesn't allow swimming at Whitehorse Lake south of Williams.

The Coconino National Forest allows swimming at all of its lakes, although they're kind of muddy and not that desirable, Amber Ramirez at the front desk said.

The Prescott Basin lakes on the Prescott National Forest have been closed to swimming for so long that it's hard for officials to remember why.

Various officials offered various theories, such as a requirement from the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality or the Arizona Game and Fish Department that owns Lynx Lake dam, but those agencies said they have no jurisdiction over the use of those waters.

Forest officials also said historical mining above the lake on Lynx Creek has resulted in high levels of heavy metals in the lake. However, those minerals apparently aren't high enough to restrict fishing.

One official thought that Lynx has been off-limits to swimming since Game and Fish built the dam in the 1960s.

But McCasland grew up in Prescott and fondly remembers swimming legally at Lynx Lake, as well as the Granite Dells pool and the "youth center" pool in town that the YMCA later purchased and converted to an indoor pool.

The Granite Dells pool was a "great place" to hang out when he was a teen, McCasland said, but he recalled it struggling with water quality standards enforced by the Yavapai County Health Department in its later years, then closing in the late 1960s or early 1970s because it kept violating those standards.

"It's just a different time," McCasland said. "We've become more of a legal society, I guess."

McCasland fondly remembers floating on tubes on Lynx Lake in his teen-aged years, too.

"If I'd have drowned, my parents never would have sued the Forest Service," McCasland said. "It was a simpler time then, I guess."

Goldwater has been off-limits to swimming ever since the city developed it as a recreation site in the 1970s, McCasland said. It was a drinking water source then, and later a back-up emergency source. By the 1990s when it wasn't even a back-up source anymore, the city didn't revisit its policy.

When the city purchased Watson and Willow lakes in 1998, its master plan included swimming beaches at both lakes.

The lakes steering committee made up of local citizens polled schoolchildren and found that swimming was at the top of their lists for desired activities at the lakes. Committee members also rated swimming as a priority.

But city officials later concluded Willow was too shallow for a beach and swimming.

Then the city concluded that it would require \$300,000 to \$400,000 worth of archaeological work to develop the proposed beach at Watson, just south of the new parking area there. Ancient Indian ruins occupied the site.

The city could have spent the money on archaeological remediation, but Watson still would have had a water quality issue, McCasland said.

"We very much wanted to have swimming," McCasland said. "We were sorry it didn't work out."

Would the city or Forest Service consider opening any lakes to swimming during years like this, when winter runoff from creeks has filled them to unusually high levels, then closing them if coliform counts reach illegal levels?

Fahrni said that would be inconsistent and confusing to recreationists, and possibly costly to conduct regular tests for coliform. McCasland said he knows what would happen: as the weather and lake water got warmer, it wouldn't be long before the city would have to close the lakes because of high coliform levels.

While the historic pools in the Granite Dells closed decades ago, new owners are looking to restore them. However, one won't be open to the public and the other won't be open to swimming.

The Arizona Garden of the Gods pool on the west side of Highway 89 in the Dells was open to the public from 1926 to 1962, said Alan Snyder of Sun Pine Homes. Under the new name of Granite Park, the company now is developing home sites there and attempting to restore the old pool under more complicated modern-day regulations, but it won't be open to the public.

Mark Wirth, the owner of the historic Granite Dells pool and dance hall on the east side of Highway 89, wants to renovate the pool and buildings back to their former glory and rent them out for gatherings.

However, the Yavapai County Planning Commission unanimously turned down his application last fall after seven neighbors voiced opposition. One woman said people should be able to do what they want with their property, then proceeded to say the proposal would be too noisy and distracting. County planning staff estimated that Wirth's proposal would have generated about the same amount of traffic as the 29 homes that Wirth could build without the county's approval.

With a strong desire to bring back a piece of Prescott's heritage, Wirth said he's thinking about how to revamp his proposal. He's confident that people are seeking places like that today, places that remind them of the old days.

Wirth said he originally wanted to open the pool for swimming again, but didn't even ask for that by the time he went to the planning commission.

"Between the health department regulations and the attorneys eating me alive—I don't think I can get insurance," Wirth said. "You know how today's society is. Back in the heyday—if you did something stupid, you paid the price."

When he was at the property during the Memorial Day weekend, about 30 people stopped by and asked to see the pool and reminisce about how much fun they had there decades ago, Wirth said.

One wonders if any of them remember anyone ever getting sick at the pool, too.

Contact the reporter at jdodder@prescottaz.com