

Water Issues Concerning Serene Lakes and Royal Gorge

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Serene Lakes altered by humans: The name “Ice Lakes” dates back to the harvesting of ice from the lakes. Maps drawn in 1866 show three lakes—Serena, Dulzura and Sybil. The three lakes were joined when a dam was built in the early 1940s. The dam still exists, located at the outflow to Serena Creek. Some groups and individuals have mistakenly stated that the lakes are “totally natural,” or “natural alpine lakes,” when in fact, they have been dammed to expand their surface area and storage capacity.



Serene Lakes dredged in the past: Serene Lakes have been excavated in the past. In 1969, the water district dredged the lakes and improved the spillway to allow for an increased drawdown of water without impairing recreational use. At the time of the 1969 dredging, water district records stated that the dredging “will be done primarily to improve the shore line at certain locations to allow drawdown without impairing the recreational use of the lake. More extensive shore line dredging is planned in future years.” The lakes were dredged again in the summer of 1980. Water was drained from one of the lakes while bulldozers dug and scraped the lake bottom.

Dredging to improve water quality, maintain recreation: Water district records indicate that dredging was completed in order to improve water quality and allow for increased drawdown while maintaining recreational benefits. An August 1974 water district document says the following: “In 1969,

FACTS ABOUT WATER ISSUES

- **Two water districts:** Water needs of Royal Gorge lands in Placer County and the existing Serene Lakes subdivision are served by the Sierra Lakes County Water District (SLCWD). Water needs of Royal Gorge lands in Nevada County are served by the Donner Summit Public Utility District (DSPUD).
- **Serene Lakes is district water source:** SLCWD obtains the bulk of its water from Serene Lakes, specifically Lake Serena. Lake Serena and Lake Dulzura are two co-joined, lakes located at the center of the Serene Lakes subdivision.
- **District uses small percentage of water it is granted:** SLCWD’s state water rights permit allows 1,177 acre-feet per year (AFY) to serve its customers. Today it uses about 110-120 AFY.
- **Royal Gorge seeks water from SLCWD:** Royal Gorge intends to submit a proposed development plan to Placer County and would seek water to serve this new development from the SLCWD.
- **Royal Gorge provides demand and supply information to district:** Royal Gorge provided SLCWD with information concerning estimated water demand to serve proposed future development, as well as preliminary ideas about how the district might meet Royal Gorge water needs. This information can be found at www.royalgorgefuture.com.
- **Royal Gorge estimated water demand:** Royal Gorge estimates its water demand at 235 AFY, which is based upon a 46 percent occupancy rate. This rate is greater than the average for the existing Serene Lakes subdivision but on par with recent environmental impact studies of relevant mountain resort projects in eastern Placer County.
- **Serving Royal Gorge is consistent with the district’s permitted water rights and its duties as a County water district:** Supplying Royal Gorge water needs would only increase the district’s water use to about 355 AFY, which is still well below its permitted rights.
- **EIR will study water:** Water demand and supply for future Royal Gorge development will be thoroughly studied during the Environmental Impact Report process to be conducted by Placer County.

the District improved the spillway and completed the first stage dredging...The dredging and shore enhancement was performed to improve the water quality by removing water-borne vegetation. Based on the success of this first stage, the District plans to continue removing the undesirable material to improve water quality and recreation benefits.” Some groups and individuals have mistakenly stated that the lakes have “100% natural lake sides” and that dredging would upset their “sustainable equilibrium” or cause erosion. Each time Serene Lakes has been dredged in the past, capacity was increased for the purpose of increasing drawdown, water quality was protected and recreational uses maintained.

Dredging recaptures lost capacity: Dredging of Serene Lakes at intervals appears to be necessary to prevent the lakes from filling with organic material. Without dredging, the ability of the water district to serve its customers could be jeopardized. The water district also has historically used dredging not only to recapture lost water storage capacity, but also to allow it to serve an increasing number of water customers. One proposal Royal Gorge hopes to discuss with the water district is to dredge the lake and recapture enough capacity to allow the district to serve existing customers and Royal Gorge’s future needs – while protecting and enhancing the lake’s recreational role by maintaining or enlarging its current surface area. *This proposal is nothing new.* It is exactly what the water district has done in the past—*dredge in order to recapture lost storage capacity, increase ability to serve new customers and enhance water quality, while protecting recreational benefits.*

Melting snow feeds lakes: Serene Lakes are fed by seasonal snow run-off. Run-off from melting snow collects in the lakes until they are filled to capacity, then water “spills” from the lakes over the weir (dam) into Serena Creek (located near Ice Lakes Lodge), ultimately reaching the North Fork of the American River. There are no state-mandated flow requirements for Serena Creek because of its small size and minor contribution to the American River system.

Proposed development not in South Yuba drainage basin: The vast majority of proposed future real estate development at Royal Gorge is located on lands in the drainage basin of the North Fork of the American River

– NOT the South Fork of the Yuba River as some groups and individuals have mistakenly stated. Lake Van Norden is located on Royal Gorge lands at the headwaters of the South Yuba River. Some minimal development on lands that drain into the South Yuba River will be considered as an option in the Royal Gorge specific plan proposal, including certain infrastructure, amenities and employee housing. Also, Royal Gorge is requesting that a number of water storage alternatives be evaluated in an Environmental Impact Report, including slightly raising the Lake Van Norden dam in order to increase the lake’s water storage capacity. This proposal would NOT restore the dam to its former height when Pacific Gas & Electric managed Lake Van Norden.

Proposed reservoir would not impact South Yuba: East Lake, one of the water storage reservoirs Royal Gorge proposes at “Lake Camp,” is not on land that drains into the South Yuba River. Also, Royal Gorge would not propose to fill this reservoir with water from a seasonal tributary to the South Yuba, as some groups and individuals have mistakenly stated.

Land ownership versus water rights: When Royal Gorge owners purchased 3,000+ acres of land at Royal Gorge, ownership of Serene Lakes bottoms was included in the purchase. There is a difference between owning the lake bottoms and water rights. The water district has rights to the water that is collected and stored in Serene Lakes. The water district was created to serve the water needs of customers within the district, including Royal Gorge.

Water for future development: As mentioned, SLCWD has rights to 1,177 acre-feet per year (AFY) of water, but uses just 110-120 AFY. The district has rights to much more water than it uses today because future development was anticipated on land surrounding the Serene Lakes subdivision. Several streets in the Serene Lakes subdivision abruptly end with utilities stubbed in anticipation of future development. Also, zoning and general plan maps indicate that future additional development surrounding the Serene Lakes subdivision has always been anticipated. Some groups and individuals have stated that “current zoning does not allow a development of the magnitude” of 950 units, but current zoning calls for more than 1,200 additional units

on Royal Gorge lands, and the Placer County General Plan would allow more than 3,000 units.

Royal Gorge proposes fewer additional units than water district has stated it will serve: Water district records indicate that the district has always planned to serve many more households than it currently serves. At one time, records indicate that the water district anticipated serving up to 4,000 households by 2006. In a 1974 letter to the State Water Resources Control Board, the water district affirmed its “decision to limit development to be served by this water supply to 2,500 equivalent single family units.” The proposed Royal Gorge development of 950 units, added to the water district’s current customers, would equal fewer than 2,000 units.

Benefiting existing water district customers: SLCWD customers must foot the bill when it comes to investments –such as dredging – that the district makes to protect its water supply. Royal Gorge provides the water district with an opportunity to make certain investments that would allow the district to serve future customers within the Royal Gorge development – but that would also benefit existing water district customers. Dredging is an example of such an investment.

Water quality: Today, significant amounts of melting snow run across landscaped yards and thousands of linear feet of asphalt pavement within the Serene Lakes subdivision, picking up petroleum and other pollutants and fertilizers that flow directly into Serene Lakes. Serene Lakes subdivision was developed before current anti-pollution laws. Today new development must treat and detain storm run-off and must produce no greater quantity nor less quality than what existed on the property pre-development. Some groups and individuals have mistakenly stated that polluted run-off from new development at Royal Gorge would flow into the Serene Lakes water supply. *Existing* development is compromising the water quality of Serene Lakes—*new* development will not make that mistake thanks to stringent new laws.

Protecting, enhancing recreation: It is Royal Gorge’s intention to work with the water district and other stakeholder groups to protect and enhance Serene Lakes’ recreational role. Some groups and individuals have mistakenly stated that dredging would inevitably

shrink the surface area of the lake, creating a four-foot muddy ring around the perimeter of the lakes. Initial indications are that dredging could recover lost capacity, slightly increase capacity, and with proper consideration of the lake contours, make no significant change to the current operating lake surface area. Sierra Lakes County Water District files indicated that dredging to 4 feet below the spillway crest has been considered an appropriate option in the past. This was the standard used to protect recreational use—so clearly dredging can be done while protecting recreation. Royal Gorge and the water district can work together to make sure that the dredging is done in a way that protects the lakes’ recreation. More study is needed in order to work out a well-designed plan that addresses concerns. One important study will be a “bathymetric” survey, which is a study of the underwater depth, terrain and contour lines of the lakes. Such a study is underway now.

Water district decides: Royal Gorge is a customer of the Sierra Lakes County Water District. Some groups and individuals have stated that Royal Gorge is threatening Serene Lakes and plans to dredge the lakes to meet water demand. Royal Gorge does not have a unilateral right to dredge or modify Serene Lakes to obtain water. Water rights for Serene Lakes are held by the water district for the benefit of properties and water users within the district’s service area. Any plan to recapture lost capacity in the lakes or increase the holding capacity of the lakes will be subject to the water district’s review and approval.

Working together: Royal Gorge seeks to work together with the SLCWD to explore opportunities to serve Royal Gorge water needs, benefit existing water district customers, and protect and enhance water quality.



For more information, visit royalgorgefuture.com