

FAQs: Oswego River Basin Water Management

Why is the Oswego River Basin prone to flooding? At 5,200 square miles, the Oswego River Basin receives flows from several directions. The Finger Lakes to the south sit at a higher elevation on the “Allegany Plateau” which means that they drain into the Erie-Ontario Lowlands. The area also receives water from the east from Oneida, Owasco, Skaneateles, and Otisco Lake watersheds and from Canandaigua Lake to the west. This can create a “bottleneck” throughout the low-lying area, especially at the confluence of the Seneca, Oneida, and Oswego Rivers – known as the Three Rivers junction. All of this water drains to Lake Ontario through the Oswego River / Oswego Canal.

Who Controls the Water? There are about a dozen entities in the basin that control water flows, including the Canal Corporation. Other water managers include private hydroelectric companies, lake associations, and municipalities. The Canal Corporation operates several water level control points along the Canal System within the Oswego River Basin. The principal locations are the dams associated with Erie Canal Lock E-26 and Erie Canal Lock E-25 at Mays Point, Lock CS-1 (Mud Lock) Cayuga Lake Outlet, E-24 (Baldwinsville) on the Seneca River, Erie Canal Lock E-23 (Brewerton) and Caughdenoy Dam on the Oneida River, and Oswego Canal Lock O-1 (Phoenix) on the Oswego River. An additional 13 water control points are managed by third parties including Canandaigua Lake Outlet, Keuka Lake Outlet, Seneca Lake Outlet, Owasco Lake Outlet, Skaneateles Lake Outlet, Otisco Lake Outlet, Oswego Canal Locks O-2 through O-7/8.

The Canal Corporation does not control releases or lake elevations at Skaneateles, Owasco, or Canandaigua Lakes, and it does not have the authority to require additional storage be used or flows be reduced. Similarly, the Canal Corporation does not control releases or lake levels at Keuka or Seneca Lakes, which discharge into Cayuga Lake. The Canal Corporation controls only the Cayuga Lake outlet but must keep the Lake below the upper end of the rule curve to ensure runoff capacity and storage availability to accommodate releases from Seneca Lake.

Geography of Cross and Cayuga Lakes: Cross Lake is low and flat, making the area prone to prolonged periods with standing water. Cayuga Lake, on the other hand, is at a higher elevation that drains faster but is subject to damaging effects of wind as well as wave action. The Canal Corporation holds back water on Cayuga Lake to manage outflow while also balancing inflow from Seneca and Keuka Lakes. However, the Canal Corporation cannot allow water to overtop the dam on Cayuga Lake.

Did Central NY receive more precipitation than normal? Central New York has experienced a higher-than-average influx of precipitation in May-June of 2025. The Canal Corporation is using best-practices to move water through a bottle-necked area with little gradient change, which takes time. High water is being experienced across the region and state this spring/summer; however, precipitation, other sources of runoff, low-lying wetlands, and lack of gradient all make water movement slow.

Does the Canal Corporation use property tax values to inform its water management practices? No. There is no consideration of property values in how the Canal Corporation manages flows in the basin.

Who can I talk to if I have more questions? Joell Murney-Karsten is the Canal Corporation representative for Central New York and is available to assist. Jeff Coulter serves as President of CNY Waterways, a membership organization providing information and advocacy throughout the Oswego River Basin.

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