

Drought-hit Panama Canal to restrict access for one year

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Vista aérea de barcos esperando para acceder al Canal de Panamá, en Bahía de Panamá, el 23 de Agosto de 2023.

The drought-hit Panama Canal will maintain restrictions on the passage of ships for one year, a measure that has already led to a marine traffic jam as boats line up to enter the waterway linking two oceans.

The canal is facing a shortage of rainwater needed to transfer ships through locks that function like water elevators, an engineering marvel that moves six percent of the world's maritime commerce up and over the isthmus between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

The canal's sub-administrator Ilya Espino, told AFP that unless heavy rains fall in the next three months, "we are looking at a period of one year" of restricted access.

That period will give clients "a year to plan" how to adapt, she said late Thursday.

Each ship moving through the canal requires 200 million liters of freshwater to move it through the locks, provided by two artificial lakes fed by rainfall in a surrounding watershed. The lakes also supply drinking water to half the country of about 4.2 million people.

However, Panama is facing a biting drought, made worse by the El Niño warming phenomenon, which has forced canal administrators to restrict the waterway to ships with a maximum draft (water depth) of 13.11 meters (43 feet).

In 2022, an average of 40 ships crossed through the canal a day, a number which has now dropped to 32 to save water.



Vista aérea de barcos a la espera de acceder al Canal de Panamá, en Bahía de Panamá, el 23 de Agosto de 2023.

Traffic jam

The measures have caused a back-up of ships waiting to enter the 50-mile (80-kilometer) waterway, which is mainly used by clients from the United States, China, and Japan.

On Thursday, some 130 boats were waiting, compared to around 90 usually in the queue.

Waiting times, usually between three and five days, have gone up to 19 days at times, although they currently stand at around 11 days.

Earlier this month canal operators said the restrictions were likely to result in a \$200 million drop in earnings in 2024 compared to this year.

To pass through the canal, vessels can reserve a slot in advance, or try and buy one via an auction process. For those unable to secure a slot, there is a long wait.

"We easily handle a queue of 90 ships" waiting, but "130 or 140 ships cause us problems and delays," said Espino.

This week Panama President Laurentino Cortizo was forced to deny an assertion by his Colombian counterpart Gustavo Petro that the canal was closed.



Un buque espera para acceder al Canal de Panamá, en la Bahía de Panamá, el 23 de Agosto de 2023.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, also referred this week to the "special" situation facing the waterway.

"We have a restriction in Panama as we have had on other occasions, but it is not true that the Panama Canal is closed," said Cortizo.

Adapt or die

The canal opened in 1914 after a monumental construction project through dense jungles and mountains, with thousands of workers perishing from tropical diseases, intense heat and rain.

Since then, more than a million vessels have transited through the canal, saving them a lengthy journey around the tip of South America.

"The big disadvantage that the Panama Canal has as a maritime route is that we operate with freshwater, while others use seawater," canal administrator Ricaurte Vasquez told AFP earlier this month.

"We have to find other solutions to remain a relevant route for international trade. If we don't adapt, we are going to die."

Due to the draft restrictions, some merchant container ships are forced to unload their cargo and send the lighter vessel through the canal, while the goods traverse Panama by rail before being reloaded.

"Right now I see that the situation is manageable, but we do have to show the industry that we are taking definitive steps to address the water

problem," former canal administrator Jorge Quijano told AFP on Friday.

"That for me is key, because otherwise we will be out of this business."

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