

Lehigh Classic 2026 Safety Plan

The purpose of this Safety Plan is to set forth the safety parameters by which the Lehigh Classic will be conducted as an event that invites public participation.

Summary of Event:

The Lehigh Classic is a whitewater race that is hosted on the Saturday of the weekend before Labor Day weekend on the Lehigh River in Pennsylvania. It was first hosted in 2012. The race features a classic course of 5.5 miles of class II-II+ rapids depending on water conditions and takes place within Lehigh Gorge State Park with guaranteed water provided by an Army Corps of Engineers managed recreational release program. Participants are encouraged to register in advance. Boats begin at the starting line in groups of 5-15 paddlers grouped largely by boat type in a “mass start by class” format for the classic. The event is hosted by an American Canoe Association Affiliate organization and has previously been featured by the USA Canoe/Kayak Wildwater Association.

Date of Event:

August 29, 2026

Name of River:

Lehigh River

Description of the river:

The Lehigh Classic is hosted on a section of the river between White Haven, PA and Rockport, PA, known as the Upper Lehigh Gorge, featuring class II-II+ rapids at a flow rate of around 1,700 cfs.

Water control (dam or natural flow)

The Lehigh River water flows are managed by the Army Corps of Engineers Francis E. Walter dam. The dam is managed to provide 24 whitewater releases. The Lehigh Classic event is scheduled to take place on a date that is selected as a whitewater release.

Event Organizer(s) and Personnel

Lehigh Classic Organizing Committee

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The Lehigh Classic Organizing Committee (LCOC) was formed in 2012 to host the Lehigh Classic, a 5.5-mile downriver race held on August 25, 2012 with over twenty-five participants. In 2013 the LCOC hosted the second annual Lehigh Classic on August 23, 2014 with over fifty participants and continued by hosting events from 2014-2017. In 2014, the Lehigh Classic also hosted the Eastern US Wildwater Team Trials and in 2022 the USA Wildwater Nationals. The LCOC is an American Canoe Association (ACA) affiliated organization and has secured event insurance from the ACA for the previous four events held. The Lehigh Classic and this proposed event are hosted within Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Gorge State Park. As such, the event must adhere to strict permit requirements in regard to safety, event and spectator management, vehicle and traffic management, as well as general respect and concern for the experiences of other park users at the time of the event.

A Race Director will oversee all activities of the event and will preside over the event. The responsibilities of other personnel are outlined herein. In 2025, the Race Director is Mark Zakutansky.

Event Insurance, Waiver and Registration

The Lehigh Classic Organizing Committee will apply for an American Canoe Association Event Sanctioning and event insurance. Insurance coverage costs will be built into registration fees. Certificates of Insurance will be provided to the landowner, Lehigh Gorge State Park, PA DCNR.

All Lehigh Classic event participants and volunteers are required to sign a waiver. Waiver forms are provided at the registration table. Registration materials warn prospective participants of the danger of outdoor activities and the river environment and also stress personal responsibility.

Each event participant must register with the Race Director on the morning of the event. Pre-registration is encouraged online to minimize paperwork, though check-in at the registration table is mandatory between 10am and 11:30am at Rockport for every participant and volunteer. The Race Director and the safety volunteers will update each participant with pertinent information and may also provide a participant packet and/or other printed materials.

Average flow and rating of rapids

The Lehigh Classic will only take place between flows of 600 cfs and 2,000 cfs on the Lehigh River White Haven, PA gauge. This ensures a river difficulty that is class I-II+ in nature.

The Lehigh River is most commonly paddled at flows between 600 cubic feet per second (cfs) and 2,000 cfs and is considered class I-II+ at these levels. At flows above 2,000 cfs, the more challenging rapids are classified as class III and the run takes on a more continuous, big-water feel. The Francis E. Walter Dam, owned and managed by the Army Corps of Engineers, is Congressionally authorized to manage downstream water flow to enhance recreation along the Lehigh River. Scheduled recreational releases for whitewater paddling are provided for 24 days a year.

Procedures Due to Unexpected River Conditions

The Lehigh Classic will only take place between flows of 600 cfs and 2,000 cfs on the Lehigh River White Haven, PA gauge.

On August 23, 2025, the planned whitewater release flow will be between 800 cfs and 1,700 cfs. Due to water storage capacity limitations and other planned uses of stored water, it is possible that flows will be limited to 800 cfs. In the most extreme circumstances of drought, natural disaster, or unexpected water diversion needs, it is possible that the scheduled whitewater release will be cancelled. Heavy rains and flooding can easily be absorbed by the Francis E. Walter dam during August conditions, thus high-water events are extremely unlikely.

Should river flows exceed 2,000 cfs, the Lehigh Classic will either be rescheduled, relocated or cancelled at the discretion of the Race Director.

In the event of a drought or canceled whitewater release, the event may be re-located 30 river miles south on the popular section of the Lehigh River from Jim Thorpe to Bowmanstown, PA at the discretion of the Race Director and Organizing Committee, which is runnable at flows down to 100 cfs and is rated as a Class I. This decision must be reached at least 48 hours prior to the event, and is subject to the approval of the ACA, local authorities, and landowners.

[\(https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/3576/\)](https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/3576/)

Accessibility

Recreational access to the Lehigh River is within the boundary of Lehigh Gorge State Park. Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) manages and patrols the river corridor. Whitewater paddlers, within Lehigh Gorge State Park are restricted to accessing the river at designated access locations only, including White Haven and Rockport but may evacuate at any location along the river corridor to the adjacent rail-trail and Park Ranger vehicle access. An event permit will be necessary for all event activities and will outline any additional considerations required by PA DCNR.

Safety Volunteers, Roles and Responsibilities, and Equipment

A team of safety volunteers will administer the race and provide assistance to event participants. A minimum of six volunteers will participate.

Before beginning the event, finish line safety volunteers will paddle the course and reach the race finish line. A series of volunteers will assist in staging event participants at the starting line and will be available during the race if assistance is needed, staggered as they launch from the starting line. A sweep race will serve as the official starter of the event and will follow all participants at the end of the trip.

Safety volunteers will carry a first aid kit, including important phone numbers; event paperwork including blank incident reports; a pen/pencil; and a cell phone. The starting line and finish line will serve as fixed first aid stations where a safety volunteer(s) will be stationed throughout the event with first aid supplies.

The Race Director will paddle the Lehigh River as close to the event as possible, likely the weekend before the event during the subsequent whitewater release to inspect the course and identify any potential hazards or changes that participants may not be familiar with.

Communication

All safety volunteers will carry a cell phone and will be reachable if needed. The Race Director, any safety volunteer, and/or PA DCNR staff may cancel the event for any reason. Cell phone service is reliable along the river corridor.

In the event of an emergency, 9-1-1 should be dialed by safety volunteer, participants, or spectators. For non-emergency situations, a list of appropriate phone numbers is included in the first aid kits provided to safety volunteers. The Race Director should immediately be notified of any emergency or non-emergency situation.

Details of River Shuttle and Spectator Access

The river shuttle for the Lehigh Classic is between White Haven (put-in) and Rockport (take-out). The driving distance is 10 minutes each way. Paddlers must access the river from White Haven and Rockport access points only. Spectator access points are available at all river access locations. A rail-trail, bicycle and hiking trail follows the entire length of the river from White Haven to Rockport. Trail access is also available at other locations.

River Traffic (Commercial rafting and/or play boaters)

The Lehigh Classic event is on very popular sections of the Lehigh River for commercial rafting and recreational boating. It is extremely likely and unavoidable that commercial rafters will be present on the Classic course at the time of the event. Commercial rafting on the Lehigh River is regulated by PA DCNR, and is restricted to groups of 20 rafts with an average of 4-6 customers, self-guided, accompanied by 3-4 professional guides in decked or sit-on-top whitewater boats. Trips are generally spaced 30 minutes apart and begin at 10am and end at 4pm.

Average Weather at Time of Race

The event is planned to be held on August 29, 2026, with summertime temperatures in the Poconos often between a high of 70 degrees Fahrenheit and 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Water temperatures are expected to be approximately 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Thunderstorms, hurricanes and other natural weather events are possible. The event will continue rain or shine. The Race Director and/or any safety volunteer may cancel the event in the case of weather that poses or may appear to pose a risk to the event and/or its participants.

Additional Policies:

- PFD's and helmets, in accordance with PA DCNR regulations, are mandatory for all participants.
- Minors are permitted to participate only when accompanied by a parent or guardian.
- Alcohol is prohibited
- Glass containers are prohibited
- All participants are required to yield to non-participants during the event
- Shelter, water and/or food is not provided
- The Race Director or any safety volunteer may disqualify, eject or otherwise ban a participant with or without cause if, for example, it is deemed that an individual(s) is not in compliance with these policies and/or otherwise poses a risk to the event, its participants, and/or the general public.