

# **Lake Almanor Water Quality Report, 2023**

Prepared for  
**Lake Almanor Watershed Group**  
**Sierra Institute for Community and Environment**

**By**

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## **Summary of 2023 Water Quality Investigation at Lake Almanor**

In 2023 the Lake Almanor Watershed Group (LAWG) authorized a water quality investigation of Lake Almanor and its main tributaries. Gina Johnston, John McMurtry, and Sierra Institute employee, Che Rubalcava-Cunan, collected temperature, dissolved oxygen, pH and electrical conductivity data at three stations in the lake, as well as stations on Bailey Creek, North Fork Feather River in Chester, North Fork Feather River at Canyon Dam and Hamilton Branch. They also collected plankton samples at two of the lake stations, LA-02 and LA-03. Dr. Johnston, professor emerita of California State University, Chico, analyzed the water quality data, as well as the plankton, and produced this report that shows all of the data and relates the results to previous studies. This was the fifteenth year that water quality analyses have been supported by generous donations in part from Almanor West Country Club and Lake Almanor Country Club. Many thanks to Captain Robert Ayers (Waypoint Charters), Brett Womack (Almanor Dock Supply) and David Welch (generous neighbor) for supplying us with boats, as well as pilots, for the lake sampling.

2023 was a wet year with over 24 inches precipitation during the Spring (January-May) compared to the average of over 20 inches. Lake Almanor was cool and had lots of dissolved oxygen at the surface in early May, but not near the bottom at the first sampling date. By mid-July, the lake was thermally stratified, meaning that water near the surface had been warmed by the sun and stayed on top of the cooler, denser water below. The effect of the thermal stratification was that dissolved oxygen was confined to the upper part of the lake and oxygen levels were at zero in the deeper water for most of the summer and fall. This created a situation where cold- water fish species could not find ideal habitat in much of the lake. The upper water was too warm and the deeper, colder water lacked sufficient oxygen for these species.

Because 2020-2022 were dry years, a lot of debris accumulated in the watershed. The Dixie Fire in 2021 produced even more material in the form of ash, loose soil and logging debris. In spring 2023, much of this debris washed into the lake, resulting in very low dissolved oxygen in the eastern basin, as measured at the two lake stations. Some debris was also at the bottom of the western basin station. This condition may take some time to resolve, depending on the rate of flushing of the reservoir.

Higher precipitation and cooler water temperatures in 2023 resulted in lower populations of bluegreen algae, which can produce toxins. Green algae and zooplankton were abundant this year, which was a sign of good health for the overall food web.

## Glossary of Terms Used in Lake Almanor Water Quality Reports

**Algae.** Algae (the plural form of alga) are one-celled plants that do not have a central vascular system for respiration and nutrient flow. Usually algae are very small, microscopic size. However, some are much larger, such sea lettuce, but are still algae because each cell can survive on its own and there is no central vascular system. Various estimates indicate there are over 70,000 species of algae that inhabit fresh water.

**“Bluegreen algae”.** These are more correctly Cyanobacteria, and not true algae. The chlorophyll in each cell is spread throughout the entire cell. This contrasts with a true algal cell which has a firmer wall, like a pea, and the chlorophyll is in sacks called chloroplasts. Most of the harmful algae bloom (HAB) problems in US lakes are caused by only about 30 species of cyanobacteria. Cyanobacteria are found in many lakes and can destroy a lake's utility by producing potent toxins (cyanotoxins), taste, and odor in the lake water. The toxins can kill or harm humans or other animals that ingest these organisms in the lake water.

**Anoxic.** Anoxic water has little or no measurable dissolved oxygen.

**Bloom.** A "bloom" usually refers to excessive algal growth. (more than 1,000 cells/milliliter)

**Cladocera.** Relatively large members of the zooplankton, such as Daphnia (water fleas), that are primarily filter feeders that eat algae and other phytoplankton.

**Coldwater Fishery.** Waters in which the maximum mean monthly temperature generally does not exceed a certain value and, when other ecological factors are favorable, are capable of supporting year-round populations of cold- water aquatic life, such as trout.

**Concentration.** Concentrations of a substance in water are usually given as ppm in the English system or mg/l in the Metric system. Below is conversion information to go from the English to the Metric system:

1 part per thousand = 1 ppt is the same as 1 gram per liter = 1 g/l

1 part per million = 1 ppm is the same as 1 milligram per liter = 1 mg/l

1 part per billion = 1 ppb is the same as 1 microgram per liter = 1 ug/l

The above are weight ratios, not molar ratios. For example, 1 ppm means 1 pound of solute per 1,000,000 pounds of water.

**Conductivity.** A simple way to determine the salinity, or total dissolved solids (TDS), in water is to measure the electrical conductivity of the water using an electric meter compensated for water temperature. This works because water conductivity is affected by the amount of salts dissolved in water.

**Copepods.** Members of the zooplankton that can be predaceous on other organisms.

**Cyanobacteria.** See Blue-green algae, above.

**Diatoms.** Diatoms are beneficial microscopic cold -water algae with hard exoskeletons. These algae are typically brown and impart a brown tint to lake water in the spring and fall.

**Dissolved oxygen (DO).** The amount of oxygen dissolved in water, and available for biological use and chemical reactions. Saturation refers to the maximum amount of DO water can hold in



solution. Both lower temperature and greater pressure result in higher DO saturation concentrations in water. Examples of the approximate saturation of DO in water at standard atmospheric conditions are: 50 °F (10 °C) >> 11 mg/l of DO, 68 °F (20 °C) >> 9.5 mg/l of DO, 86 °F (30 °C) >> 8 mg/l of DO.

**Epilimnion.** The epilimnion is the upper portion of the lake above the metalimnion (See definition below.) In most US lakes and other fresh water bodies the epilimnion extends from the surface to 2-3 meters deep, but in some large lakes, such as Almanor, it can extend much deeper (down to 12 meters in late summer). Usually, the epilimnion is mixed well enough by wind so that the water temperature, dissolved oxygen (DO), pH, and conductivity, from the surface down to the metalimnion, are nearly the same at every test point in the lake.

**Eutrophic.** See trophic status.

**Filter feeder.** an animal that feeds by sieving or straining small food items from water.

**Hypolimnion.** The hypolimnion is the lower portion of the lake, from the metalimnion to the lake bottom. The temperature is constant and dissolved oxygen may be low or depleted in the summer.

**Mesotrophic.** See trophic status.

**Metalimnion.** The transitional layer in a thermally stratified lake between the upper warm epilimnion and the deep cold hypolimnion. Generally, temperature and dissolved oxygen decrease with depth. The thermocline is part of the metalimnion, where temperature declines at least 1 °C for every increase of 1 meter in depth.

**Oligotrophic.** See trophic status.

**Photosynthesis.** Photosynthesis involves the use of energy from sunlight, water and carbon dioxide to produce glucose and oxygen.

**Phytoplankton.** Microscopic algae or bacteria that live free floating in the water column.

**Plankton.** Organisms that live free-floating in the water column of a lake with little or no power of locomotion.

**Respiration.** Aerobic respiration breaks down organic molecules in the presence of oxygen to produce carbon dioxide and water.

**Rotifers.** Relatively small members of the zooplankton that can be filter feeders but some are also predaceous.

**Secchi Depth.** Secchi depth is a measurement of water clarity using a Secchi disc. The Secchi disc was invented by Pietro Angelo Secchi (science advisor to the Pope in the late 1800s). It is usually an 8-inch (20 cm) flat round plate, with alternating black and white quadrants, and a rope at the center to lower it into the water, usually from the shady side of a boat. The Secchi depth is the water depth at which the disc is no longer visible.

**Thermal stratification:** This usually refers to late spring and summer-time conditions when

water near the surface is warmed up by the sun, and the wind can only mix the "less dense" epilimnetic water that extends from the surface of the lake down to the metalimnion. The deeper regions of the reservoir are not circulating because they are denser than the warmer overlying epilimnion.

**Thermocline.** The traditional definition of a thermocline is the range of depths, in stratified summer conditions, where the water has at least a 1°C decline in temperature within a 1 -meter change of depth.

**Trophic Status.** The trophic status usually refers to the level of algal nutrients, primarily nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P), and organic production in an aquatic system. Lake water quality can be described by its trophic status:

**a. Oligotrophic** (low food availability) lakes are more often found in mountain areas or lakes with very little nutrient inputs. These lakes are clear and blue with low algal productivity, and with Secchi depth visibility > 8 m (25 ft). Since there are few algae, there is not much of a food chain and so fish need to be stocked in these lakes.

**b. Mesotrophic** (moderate food availability) lakes have sufficient algal productivity to support lake fisheries, and have Secchi depths 2-4 m (6-12 ft)

**c. Eutrophic** (high food availability) lakes have large external nutrient inputs, and are characterized by excessive algae (primarily cyanobacteria) and aquatic weed growth. Fisheries are not as good, as cyanobacteria are not edible and their decomposition can deplete bottom waters of dissolved oxygen. Secchi depths in eutrophic lakes range 1-2 m (3-6 ft) and less than 1 m (3 ft) in hypereutrophic lakes. These lakes often have noxious odors associated with the presence and decomposition of cyanobacteria blooms.

**Turbidity.** Cloudiness in water caused by particulate matter suspended in the water that decreases water clarity and can affect beneficial uses. Turbidity is either inorganic, such as clay particles, or organic, such as algal cells.

**Warmwater Fishery.** Warm-water fish streams and lakes support fish species such as smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, and other species with less stringent temperature requirements than trout. Warm-water streams and lakes can also contain stocked trout or salmon, but these fish may not survive year-round.

**Water column.** A conceptual column of water from the surface of a lake to the bottom sediment.

**Watershed.** An area of land that drains all the streams and rainfall to a common outlet such as the outflow of a reservoir, mouth of a bay, or any point along a stream channel.

**Zooplankton.** Tiny animals that have some motility, but are also carried passively in a body of water.

Some definitions modified from "Lakes A to Z Help Guide", Medora Corporation ([www.medoraco.com](http://www.medoraco.com))

## Introduction and Project Overview

A water quality monitoring program for Lake Almanor was conducted during 2023, combining the protocol used by California Department of Water Resources in previous years and that used by Dr. Gina Johnston and Mr. John McMurtry in 2009-2013. The Sierra Institute for Community and Environment and the Lake Almanor Watershed Group (LAWG) provided oversight for the contract. Due to the limited funds available for this project, LAWG selected some of the important parameters that had been monitored in the past by California Department of Water Resources (DWR), Plumas County and Pacific Gas & Electric Company. Four sampling windows were chosen to provide a look at lake health: during spring turnover (May), the period of heavy recreational use (July and September) and fall turnover (November). Three stations in the lake were selected: LA-01 near the Intake Tower, LA-02 in the east basin, and LA-03 in the west basin.

Tributary stations included: A station in Chester (NFFR-1) for monitoring the North Fork of the Feather River just prior to discharge into the reservoir, the North Fork of the Feather River near Canyon Dam (NFFR-2), Bailey Creek at Highway 36 (BC-5), Hamilton Branch downstream of Mountain Meadows Dam (HB-01C), Hamilton Branch upstream of Lake Almanor (HB-01B) and Hamilton Branch at Lake Almanor (HB-01A).

Lake and tributary sampling stations for the 2023 study are shown in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 2.** shows land ownership parcels in the Almanor Basin, indicating general land uses in the various regions within the watershed. It is included to assist in understanding potential connections to sources of contaminants (nutrient loading), or physical water quality impairments (water temperature, sediment loads, etc.).

Parameters that were monitored in 2023 included:

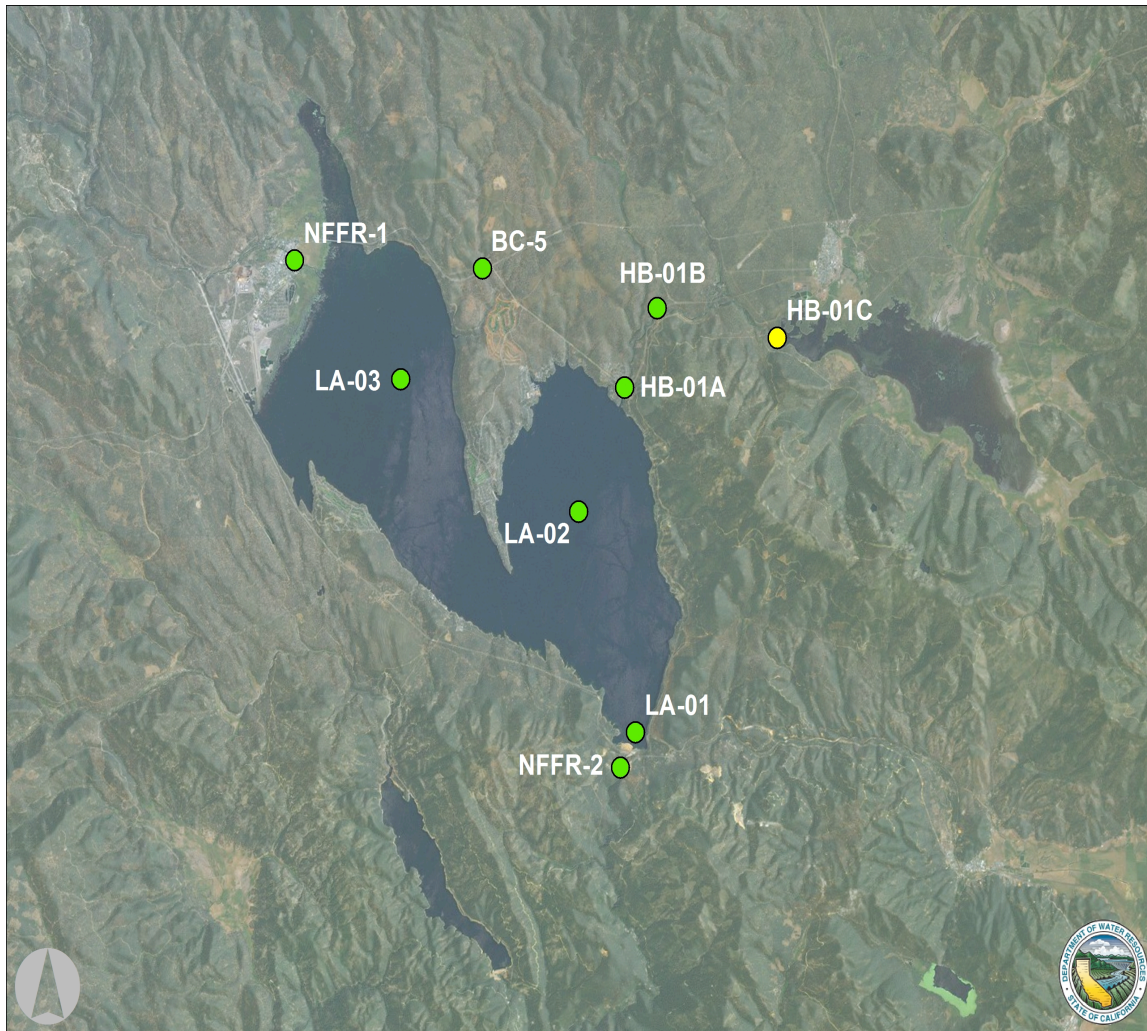
1. Physical: temperature, dissolved oxygen, Secchi depth (where applicable), electrical conductivity and pH at lake and tributary stations.
2. Biological: phytoplankton and zooplankton at LA-02 and LA-03 in the lake.

(We have not been able to include chemical analyses of inorganic and organic elements and compounds since 2018 due to the high cost. Turbidity is no longer included due to lack of instrumentation, although it had been in 2014-2020.)

## Methods Used for Sampling and Analysis

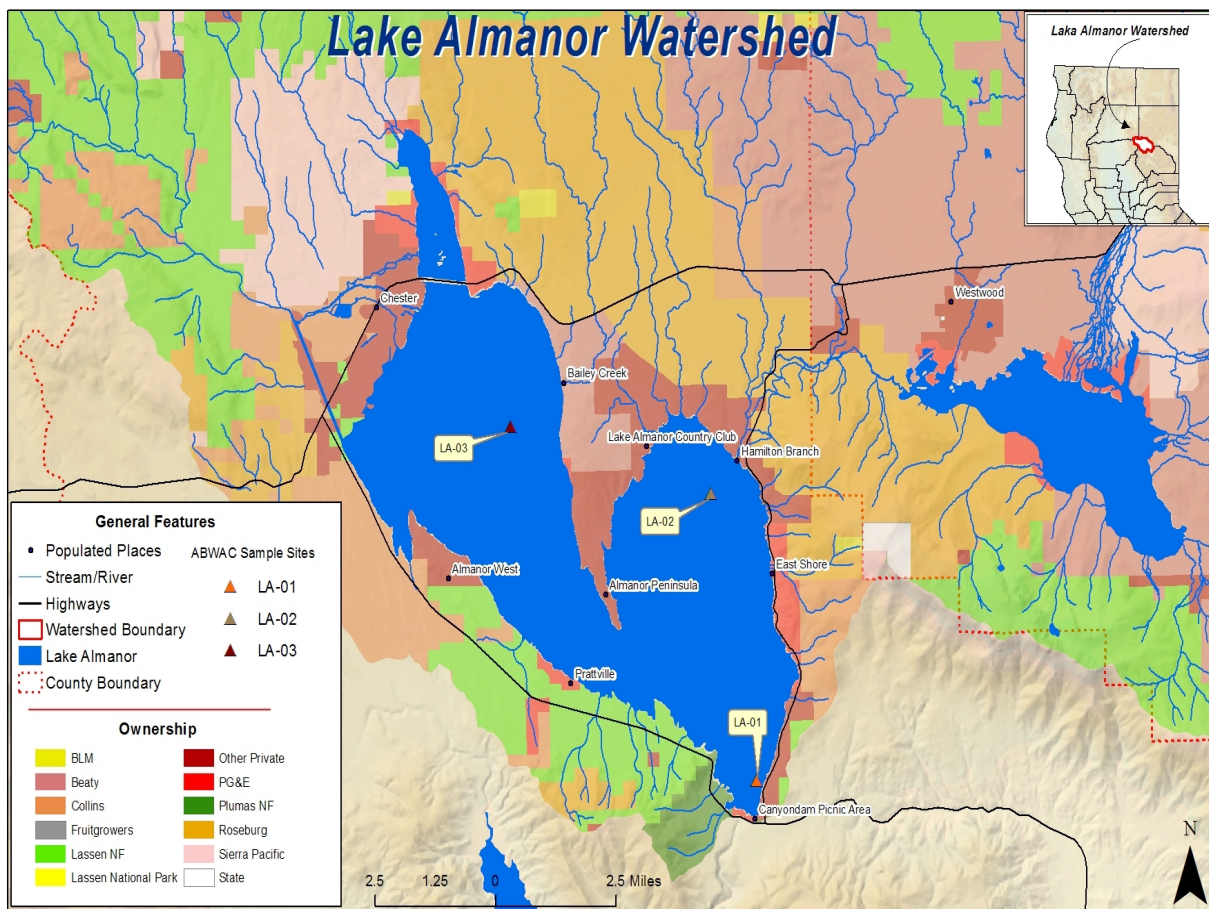
**Field Parameters— Stream-** Basic water quality parameters, including dissolved oxygen, electrical conductivity and pH, were measured with properly calibrated field instrumentation at each visit to every monitoring station. Stream measurements were taken about one foot below the surface in flowing, well-mixed riffle or run areas. Water temperature, conductivity, dissolved oxygen, and pH were measured in streams with a YSI Professional Plus handheld multi-parameter meter with a 4-meter cable. The meter was calibrated the day prior to sampling following the instrument manual.

**Figure 1. Lake and Tributary Sampling Station Locations in Lake Almanor Watershed**  
Used in 2014-2023 studies. (Map provided by Scott McReynolds, CA Dept. of Water Resources)





**Figure 2. Lake Almanor Watershed Land Ownership** (courtesy of Emily Creely, formerly with Sierra Institute)



**Field Parameters— Lake-** Water temperature, electrical conductivity, dissolved oxygen, and pH in the lake were measured at one- meter intervals from the surface to the bottom using a calibrated YSI Professional Plus meter and 30- meter cable assembly to access any potential depth in Lake Almanor.

Secchi depth was measured at all three lake stations by lowering a disk attached to a tape measure until it was no longer visible and then raising the disk until it was just visible. The depth when it went out of view and the depth when it came into view were noted. These two depths were averaged and recorded as Secchi depth. This was done on the shady side of the boat to avoid reflection.

**Biological Parameters** -Phytoplankton samples were collected with a Wisconsin type conical net (80 -micron mesh) that was pulled from the bottom to the surface to produce an integrated sample. They were preserved with formalin solution.

Phytoplankton were counted and were identified to division (Chlorophyta, Chrysophyta, etc.) and to genus when this would allow for comparison with previous data and when the genus would be indicative of water quality.

Zooplankton samples were collected with a net towed from the bottom to the lake surface to produce an integrated sample and preserved with formalin solution.

Zooplankton were enumerated and identified to order (Cladocera, Copepoda, etc.) and to suborder or genus when this would allow for comparison with previous data or where the identity had water quality significance. (Again, certain genera are indicators of lake health and it is important to know their abundance.)

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Physical Parameters

#### a. Temperature

The temperature data are shown in graphic form for each lake station (See **Figures 3, 4, and 5**, as well as Table 1 in Appendix). In May 2023 LA-01 was still nearly isothermal. Temperature at the surface was 8.0°C (46.4°F), and at the bottom it was around 6.6°C (44°F). LA-02 was about 10.5°C at the surface and the bottom was at 6°C. LA-03 was around 10.9°C (50°F) at the surface and 10.5°C at the bottom. Both LA-01 and LA-02 bottom temperatures were cooler than the values for 2022, although the sampling date was slightly later. This was most likely due to more spring runoff.

By July 13, 2023, stations LA-01 and LA-02 were thermally stratified. The epilimnion was about 22°C (72°F) at LA-01 and LA-02. The metalimnion was between 8 and 12 meters at LA-01, but 7-13 meters at LA-02. At LA-03 the temperature from top to 7m depth was about 22°C, then cooled to about 11°C at the bottom. The surface temperature at all three stations was about the same. The bottom temperature at LA-01 and LA-02 was 8°C, which was considerably cooler than in 2022.

The next sampling date was September 9, and LA-01 was still stratified, although the surface temperature had cooled to 20°C. The epilimnion extended down to 10 meters depth. Temperature dropped off to 10°C at the bottom. At LA-02 stratification was still present and the epilimnion was well mixed to a depth of 8 meters with a temperature of about 20°C. The temperature then dropped off to 8.6°C at the bottom (18 meters). LA-03 was well mixed, with a temperature of 20°C (68°F) throughout. Water temperatures were warmer at the surface, but cooler at the bottom, compared to 2022.

At the November sampling, all three stations were isothermal. LA-01 and LA-02 were at 11°C throughout and LA-03 was just slightly cooler at 10.5 °C.

Water temperatures were generally a little different than in 2022. This was primarily due to much greater snowmelt and runoff in the spring, causing lower temperatures at the bottom of the water column at LA-01 and LA-02.

In summary, the lake warms up over the summer as it absorbs solar radiation and the heat energy gets distributed through the water column primarily by wind mixing. The wind is not strong enough to mix deeper than about 12 meters, as marked by the depth of the top of the metalimnion. Below the metalimnion, the hypolimnion is stable and cool. LA-03 is only 7-9 meters deep, so water can be fully mixed by wind action. By late summer most of the lake volume is 15°C (59 °F) or warmer and only the deeper parts of the eastern basin have water temperatures cooler than 12°C (50 °F). By July only LA-01 has appreciable water with a temperature below 12°C and that is in the deepest region of the lake (below 14 meters depth). This has been the case for several years.

Temperature in the North Fork of the Feather River at Chester, CA (Station NFFR-1) followed a similar seasonal pattern to the lake, although it was generally cooler than the lake temperature. The highest temperature was in July at 12.4°C (54°F), which was about the same as 2022. (See Figure 6, as well as Table 1 and Figure 2 in the Appendix.) By November 2023, it had cooled back to 6.1°C (43°F).

Data for Hamilton Branch at Lake Almanor are shown in **Figure 7**. In mid-July it was 15.5°C, about 3°C warmer than the NFFR at Chester, CA. In 2022 it was 1°C cooler. By September it was 13°C, while the lake epilimnion was 20°C. By November, the temperature was down to 7.2°C.

Physical data for other tributaries are in the Appendix, Table 1.

There was still a considerable temperature difference between Hamilton Branch at Mountain Meadows (HB-01C) and where it enters Lake Almanor (HB-01A). There was about 8.6°C (15.5°F) drop in temperature along this creek in July, mostly due to spring inflow. This again shows the importance of the lower portion of Hamilton Branch as a cold-water refuge for fish. In September there was still about 5°C drop in temperature in Hamilton Branch between Mountain Meadows and Lake Almanor. In 2022 there was a 3°C drop in temperature.

#### b. Oxygen

The oxygen data are shown in graphic form (**Figures 3, 4, and 5**) along with the temperature for each station for each date, as well as in Table 1 in the Appendix. The amount of oxygen that can be dissolved in freshwater is primarily a function of temperature and atmospheric pressure. Temperature is very important, since the higher the water temperature the less oxygen can be dissolved. The higher the elevation, the lower the atmospheric pressure, and the lower the pressure, the less oxygen can be dissolved. Thus, alpine lakes and streams have less dissolved oxygen than their counterparts at sea level (where the atmosphere pressure is higher) when they are at the same temperature. Biological processes also affect the oxygen concentration. Photosynthesis produces oxygen and respiration, including decomposition, consumes oxygen. Near the surface of a lake, photosynthesis generally exceeds respiration and dissolved oxygen concentration is high. In the deeper part of a lake, respiration exceeds photosynthesis and dissolved oxygen decreases. The amount of mixing with the atmosphere (usually due to wind action in a lake or turbulence in a stream) can affect oxygen concentration. All of these factors must be considered when trying to interpret the change in oxygen concentration from the surface of a lake to the bottom or the change from season to season.

In May 2023 the oxygen concentration at LA-01 was over 10 ppm at the surface, but gradually dropped to less than 1 ppm near the bottom at 23 meters, even though the temperature was close to 8°C throughout. At LA-02 the oxygen concentration was also over 10 ppm at the surface and stayed above 10 ppm until 12 meters depth, then dropped to 2 ppm and then to zero. At LA-03 the oxygen concentration was over 13 ppm at the surface and stayed above 10 ppm until 7.5 meters depth and then dropped to 4 ppm near the bottom. Typically, the oxygen concentration would be high and constant from surface to bottom at all three stations at this time of year.

In mid-July 2023, oxygen concentration in the epilimnion at LA-01 and LA-02 about 9 ppm, and the epilimnion water temperature was about 22°C (72 °F). Due to the shallow conditions at LA-03, oxygen was 8 ppm throughout. In the hypolimnion at LA-01, the oxygen level dropped to zero below 14 meters. There was zero oxygen below 12 meters at LA-02, as well. Because the lake was thermally stratified, the deeper portion of the lake (hypolimnion) was isolated from the effects of wind mixing. Also, oxygen was consumed by decomposition at a faster rate than photosynthesis could produce it, so the oxygen level dropped. At LA-02 oxygen increased in the metalimnion between 7 and 9 meters and then dropped to zero. At LA-03, Oxygen concentration was constant at 8 ppm, but the temperature was 22°C from the surface to 7 meters depth, near the bottom.

By September 9, thermal stratification was still present and oxygen concentration was between 6-8 ppm in the epilimnion of LA-01. The epilimnion extended down to a depth of 10 meters. Below 12 meters at LA-01 oxygen decreased to zero. At LA-02, oxygen levels were 7-8 ppm to a depth of 8 meters and then dropped off to zero below 10 meters. Oxygen concentration was 6-7 ppm throughout the water column at LA-03, with the water temperature at 20°C.

An examination of the DWR data base (1989-2004) for Lake Almanor shows that the annual pattern for temperature and oxygen has been about the same since their records began. Low levels of oxygen in the hypolimnion are the “norm” for most of summer. However, during drought years, thermal stratification is established earlier and the temperature of the water in the deeper parts of the lake is warmer than in years with more normal precipitation. This is probably due to lack of snowmelt entering from streams or runoff in the spring. The result is very low or zero oxygen concentration in the hypolimnion from July through September. In years with more normal precipitation, such as 2016 and 2019, or above average precipitation, such as 2017, thermal stratification is established later and the temperature of the hypolimnion is cooler. Oxygen persists longer in the hypolimnion during the summer. The temperature and oxygen data for the three lake stations in 2022 showed this pattern with an extremely dry spring and little to no runoff. The year 2023 was a wet year and did have cooler temperatures in the hypolimnion. There should have been more dissolved oxygen present in the hypolimnion at LA-01 and LA-02, but that was not the case. Some other conditions were affecting the dissolved oxygen that weren’t present in past years.

As discussed in earlier reports, the low levels of dissolved oxygen stress the cold-water fish species in the lake, since the regions where both temperature and oxygen preferences are met become scarce. In dry years like 2012-2015, the region of suitable temperature and oxygen may not be present at all from late July to late September. In 2016 suitable habitat was still present in the east arm in late June. It had disappeared by September. In 2017 there may have been some suitable habitat in the east arm in August. In 2018 and 2019 oxygen depletion was not as severe as in previous years and cool water with oxygen levels around 4 ppm was available throughout most of the summer in the eastern arm. Because 2020 was a dry year, it followed the pattern of drought years, with little to no oxygen available in the hypolimnion of LA-01 and LA-02 from July until turnover occurred. That was sometime after our last sampling date at the



end of September. The year 2021 was extremely dry and there was little to no spring runoff. By mid-July there was no oxygen below 14 meters at LA-01. This anoxia persisted until turnover in October. At LA-02 oxygen increased below the epilimnion between 6-12 meters as temperature decreased, creating a zone where fish could survive. Below 12 meters oxygen dropped and remained anoxic until turnover. 2022 was even drier than 2021, with no spring runoff. This resulted in higher water temperatures at the bottom of the lake and probably earlier onset of thermal stratification. 2023 was a wet year with high spring runoff, cooler water temperatures at the bottom of the lake, but persistent low levels of dissolved oxygen at LA-01 and LA-02 throughout the study period. Even LA-03 had decreased levels of oxygen in May and July near the bottom and that was very unusual.

Oxygen levels in the Feather River are always higher than in the lake, primarily because of the colder water temperature and the turbulence of the water (See Figure 6). In 2022 the oxygen level stayed near 10 ppm all year, although the river got up to 13°C in July. Hamilton Branch did get warmer in the late summer, but was cooler than the lake surface water by 9°C in July, compared to 11°C in 2021. Oxygen content was always 10 ppm or more.

Figure 3. Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen at Lake Almanor Station LA-01, 2023

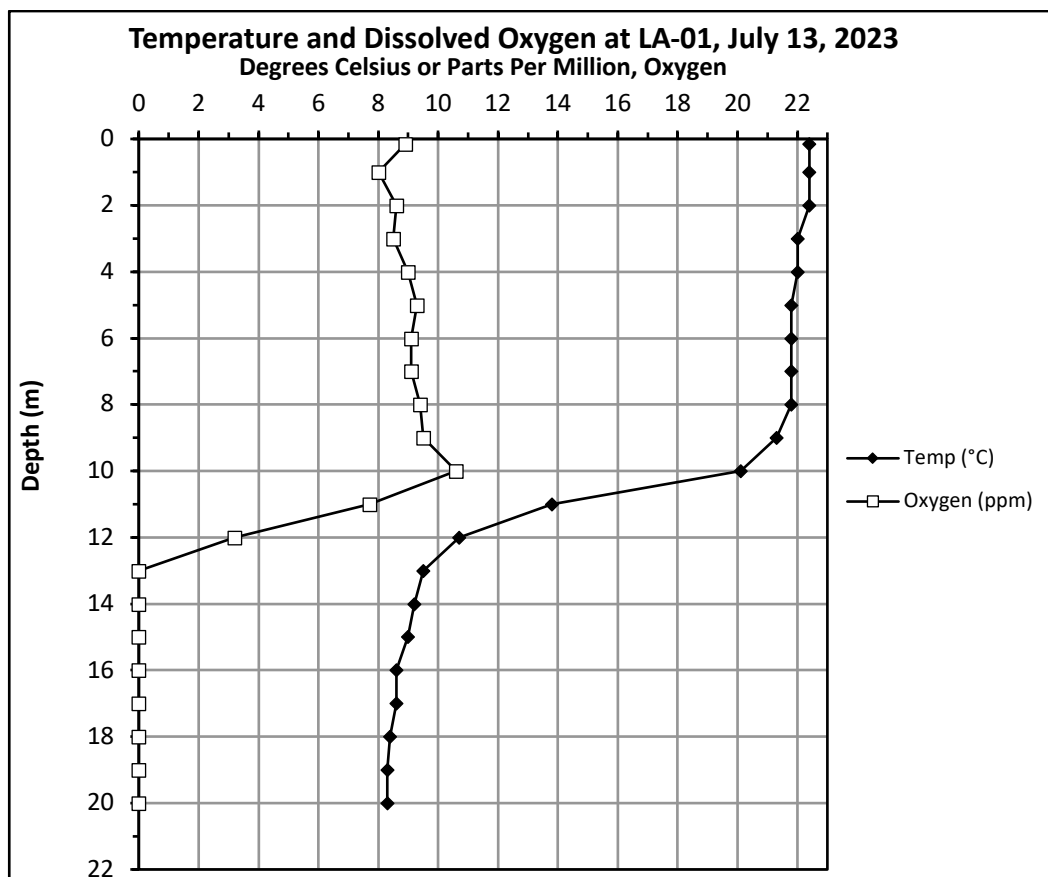
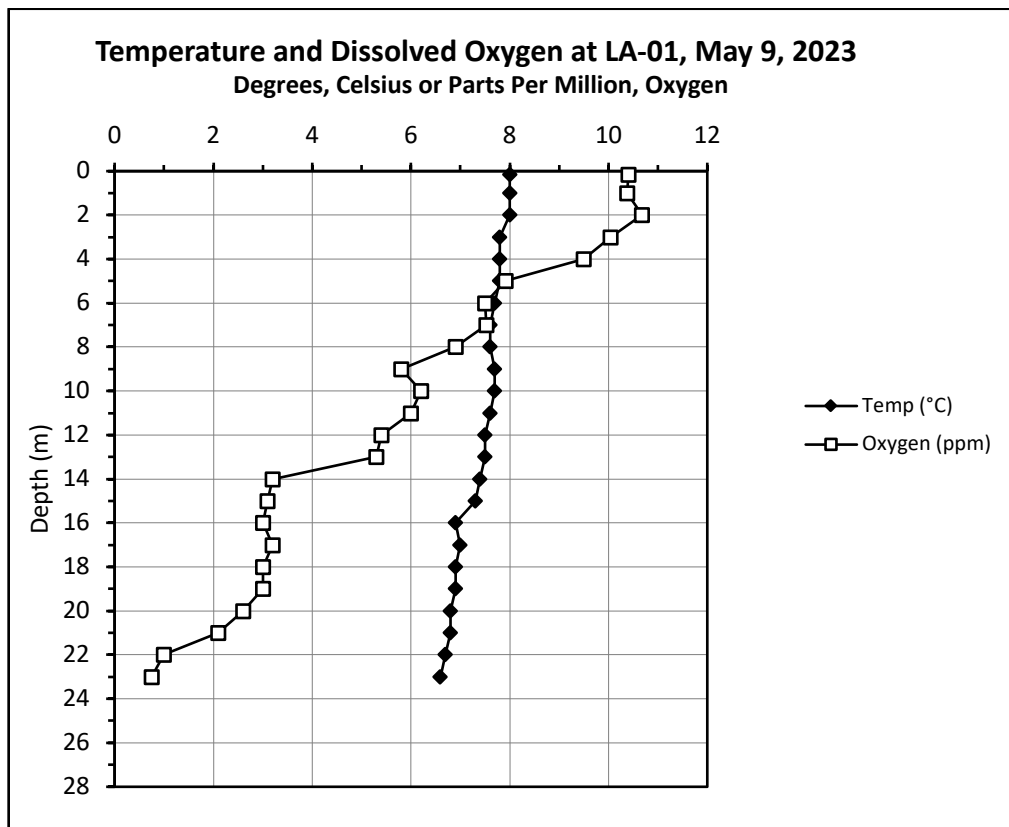


Figure 3 (cont.). Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen at Lake Almanor Station LA-01, 2023

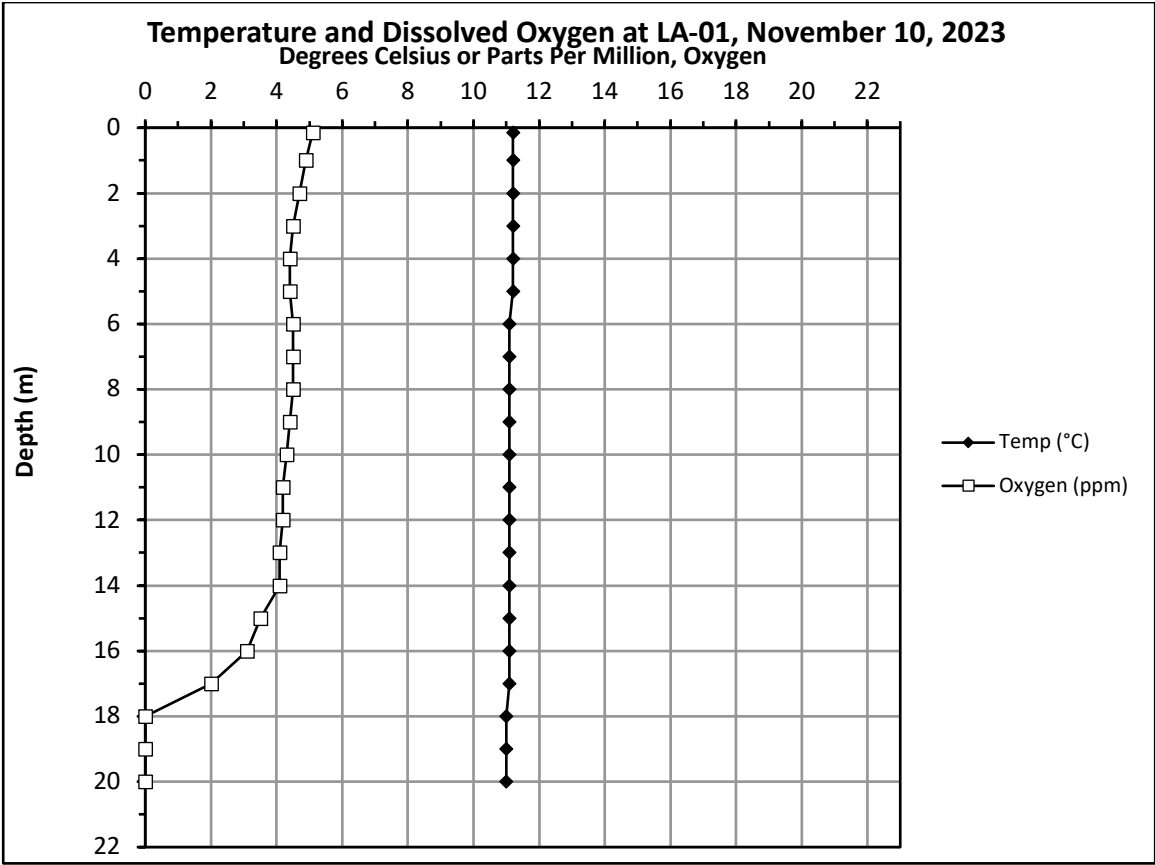
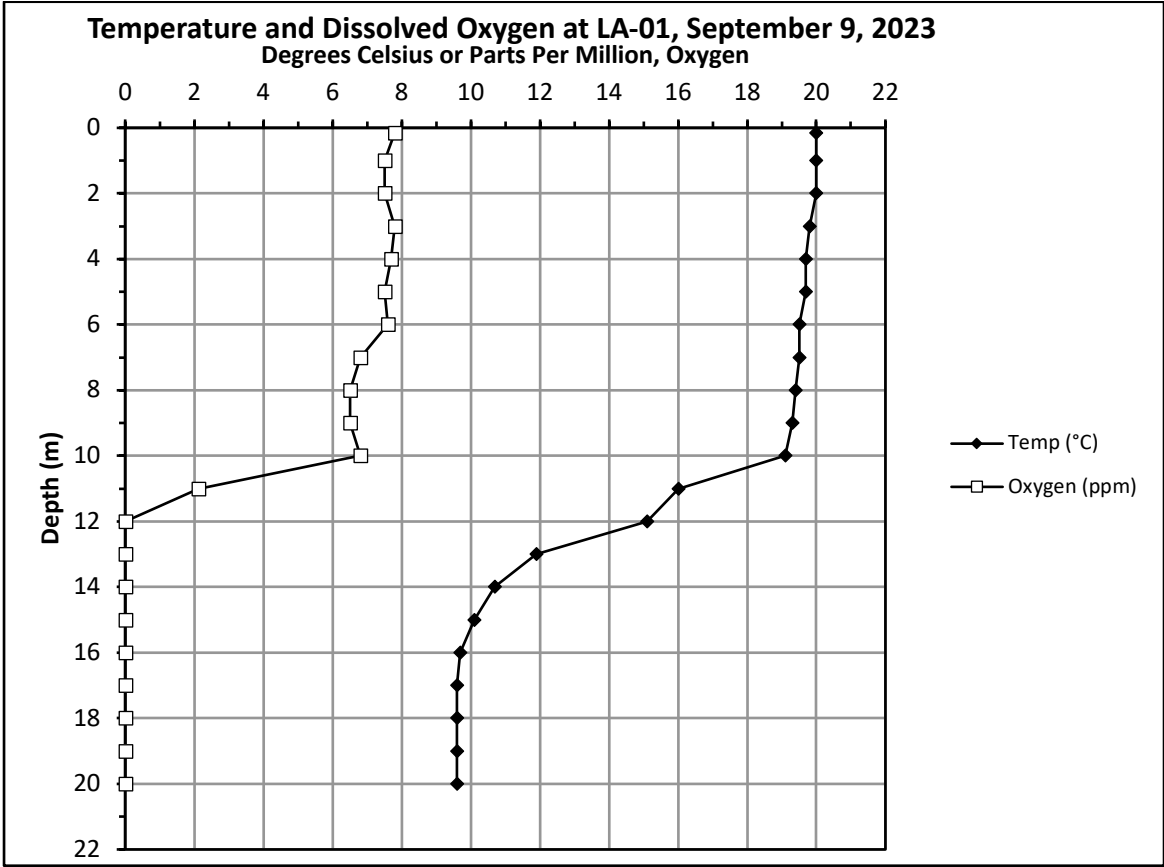


Figure 4. Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen at Lake Almanor Station LA-02, 2023

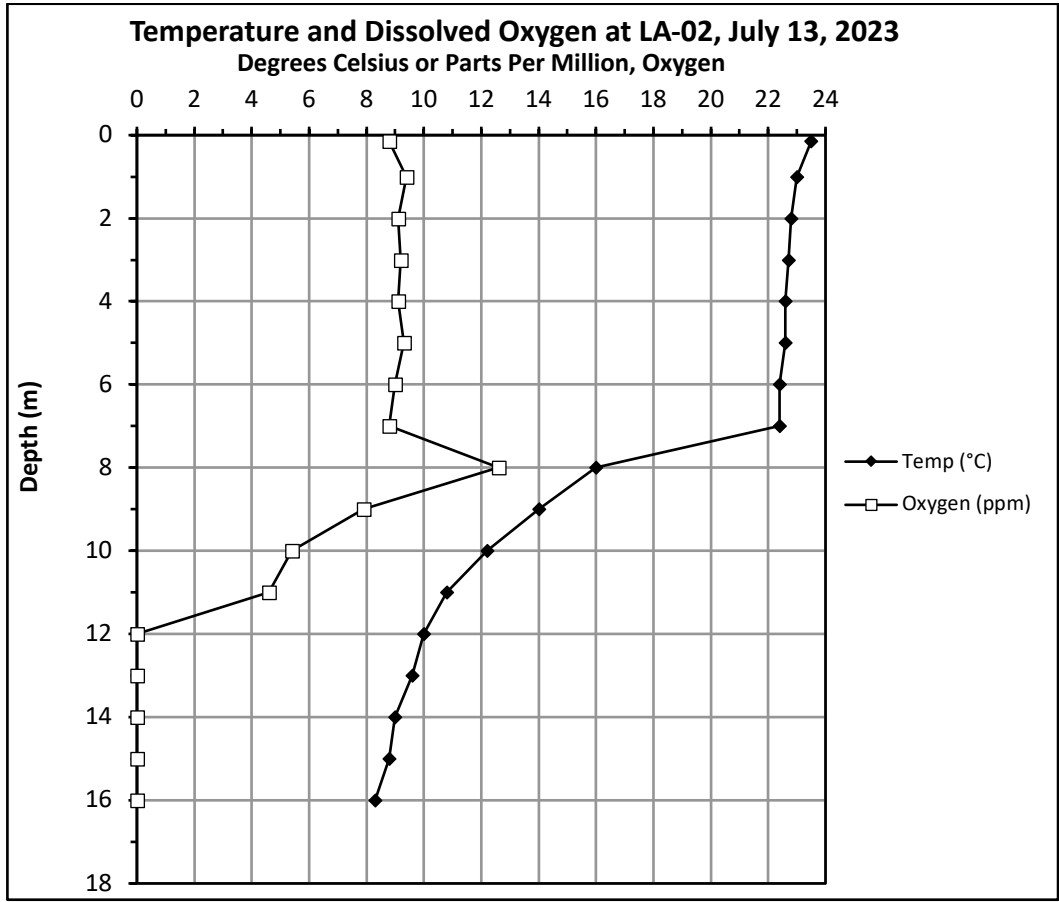
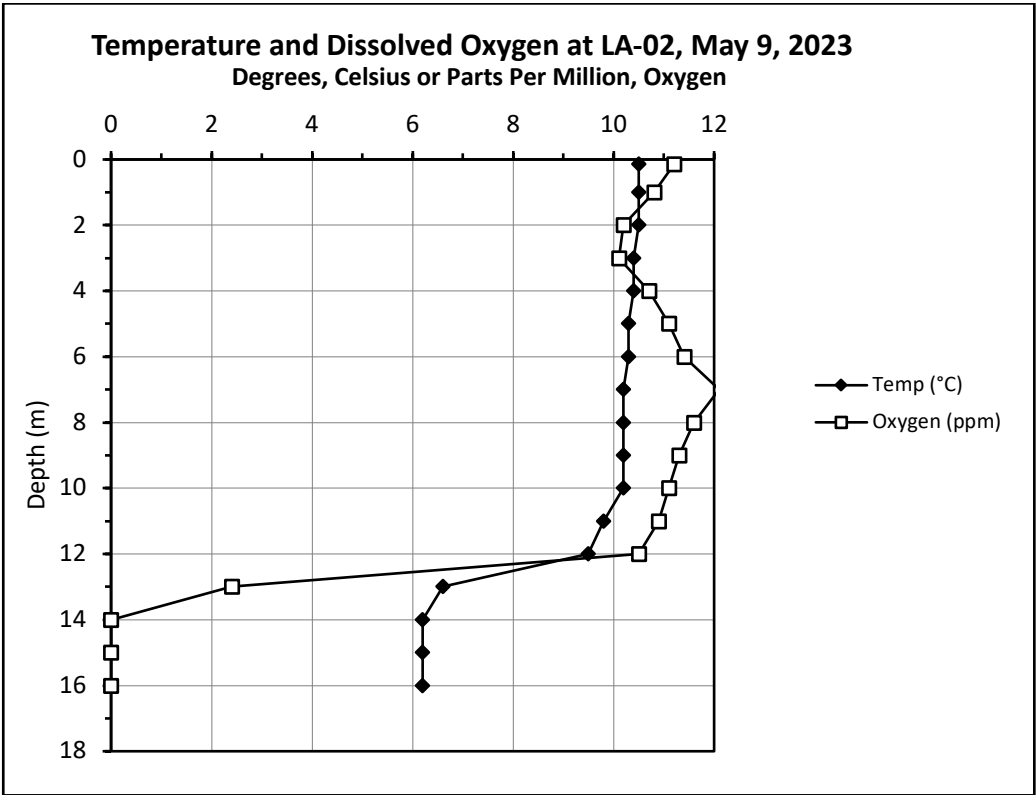


Figure 4 (cont.). Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen at Lake Almanor Station LA-02, 2023

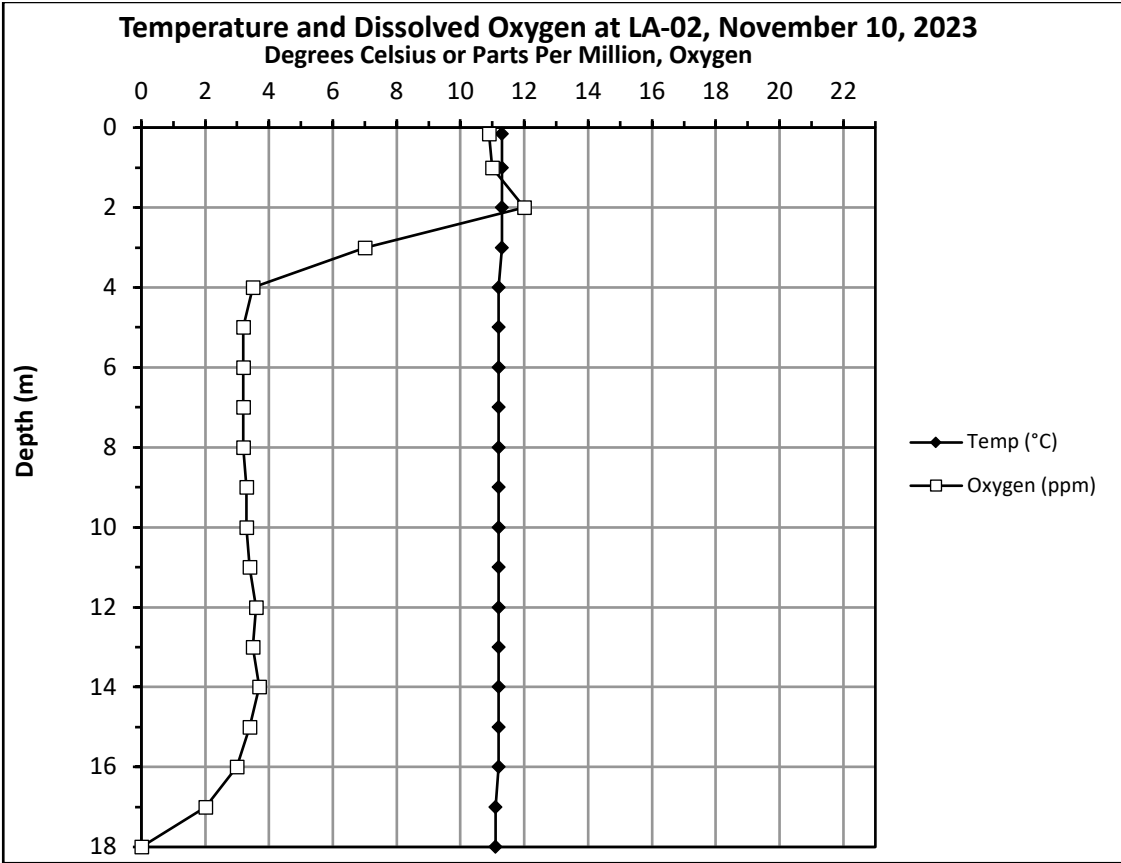
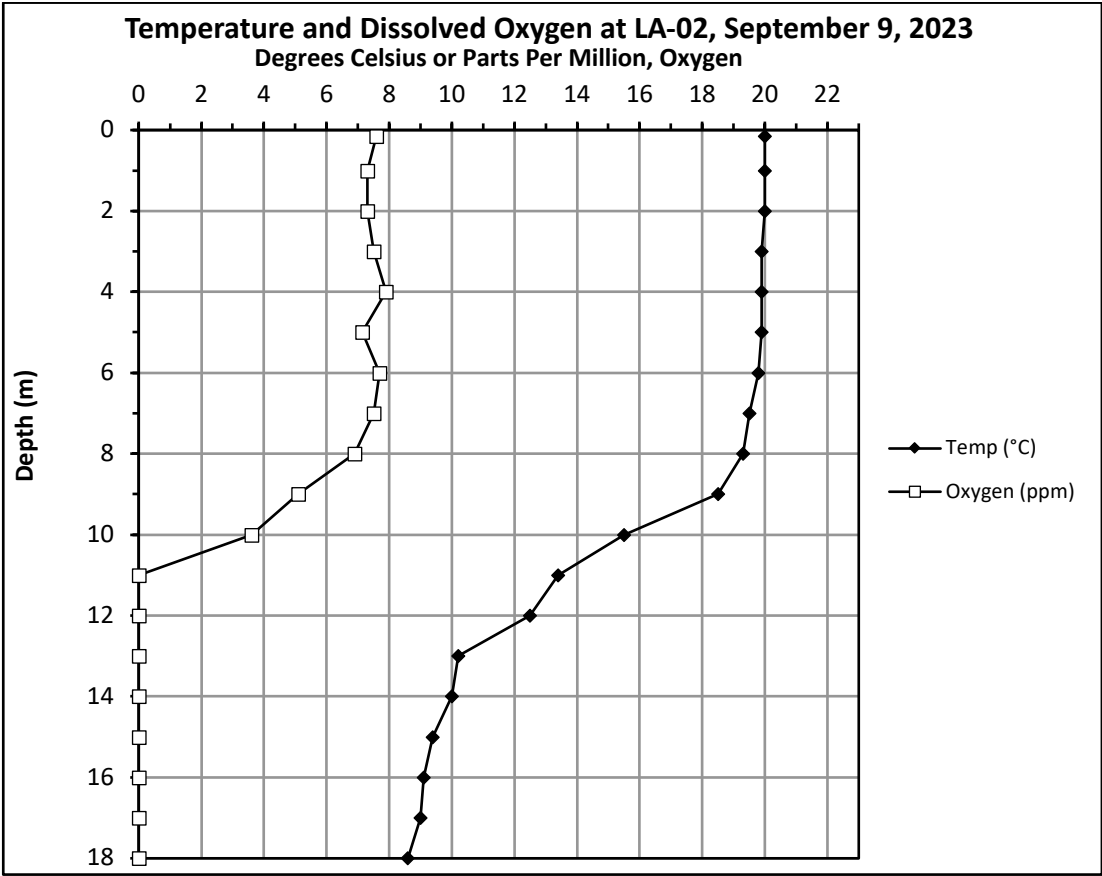


Figure 5. Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen at Lake Almanor, Station LA-03, 2023

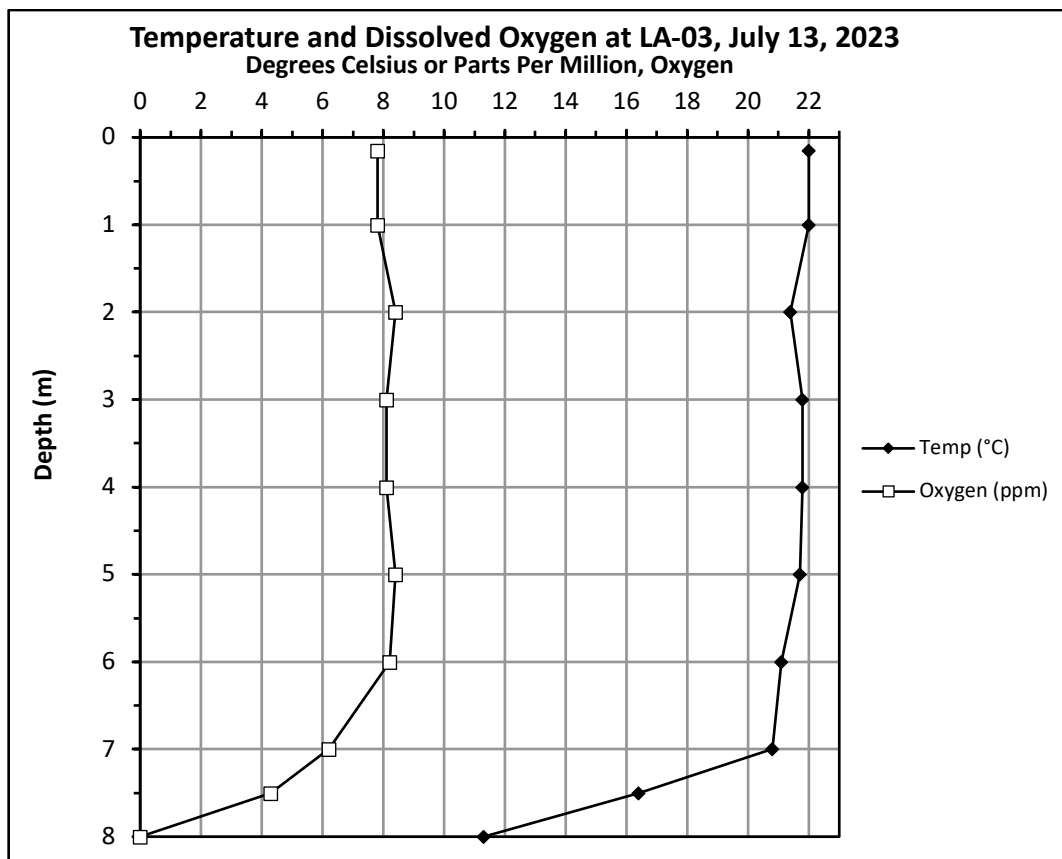
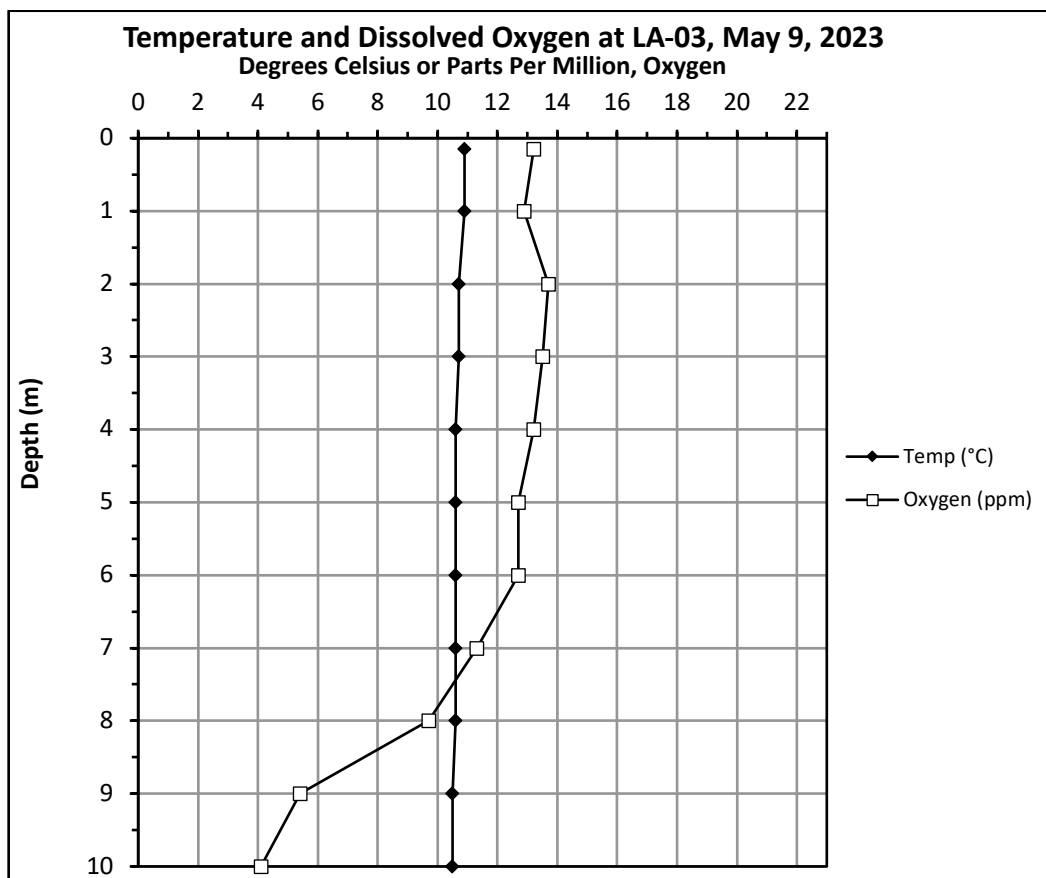


Figure 5 (cont.). Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen at Lake Almanor, Station LA-03, 2023

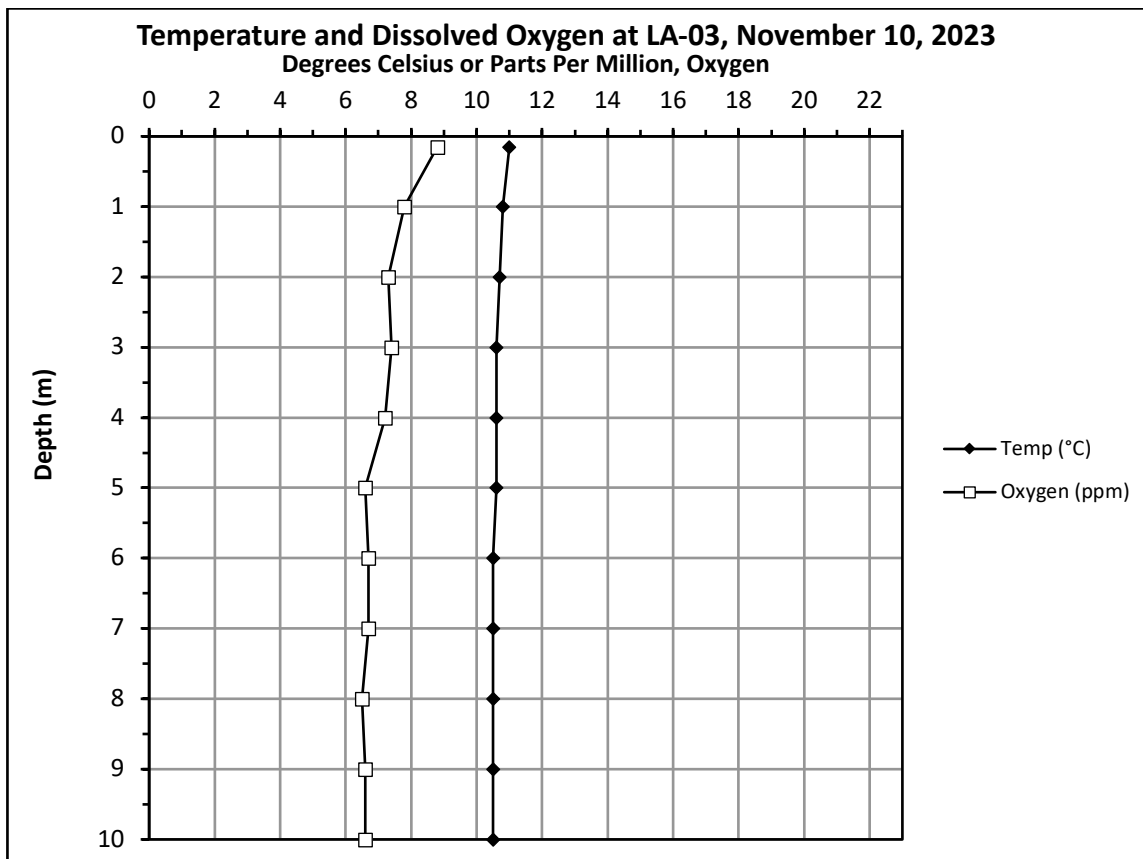
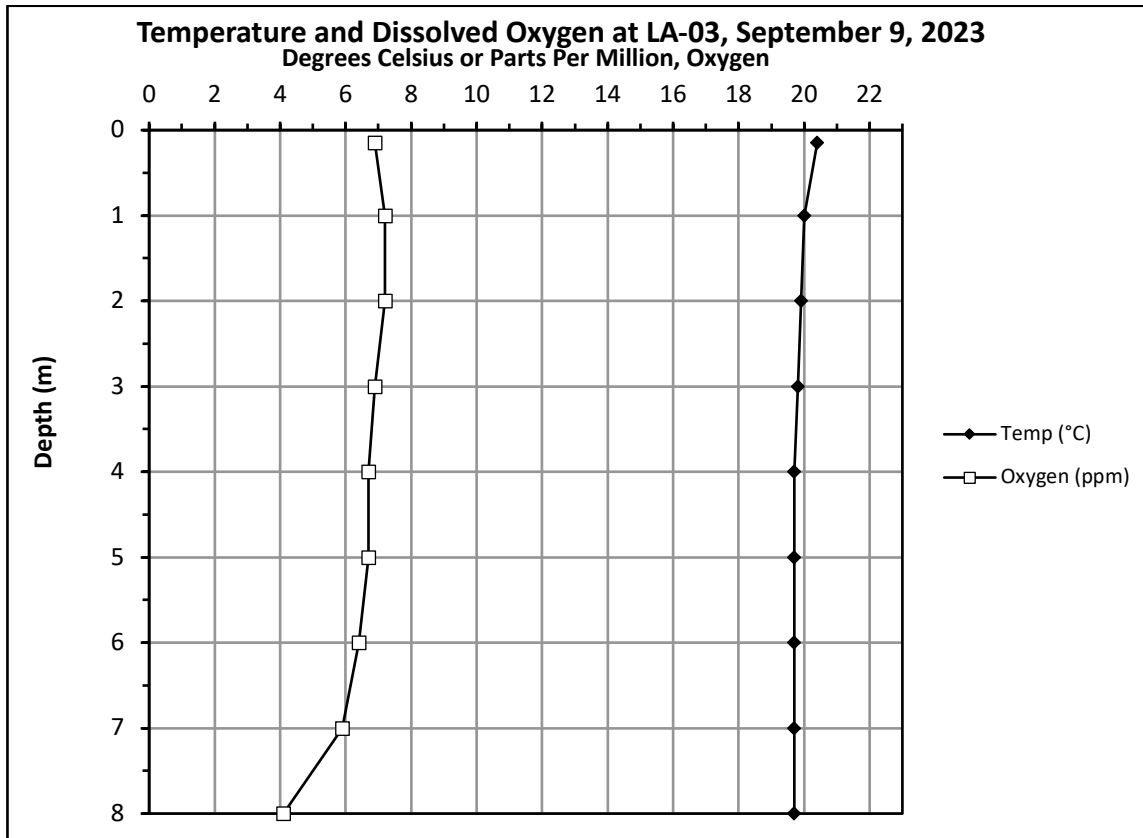


Figure 6. Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen at Station NFFR-1, Chester, During 2023

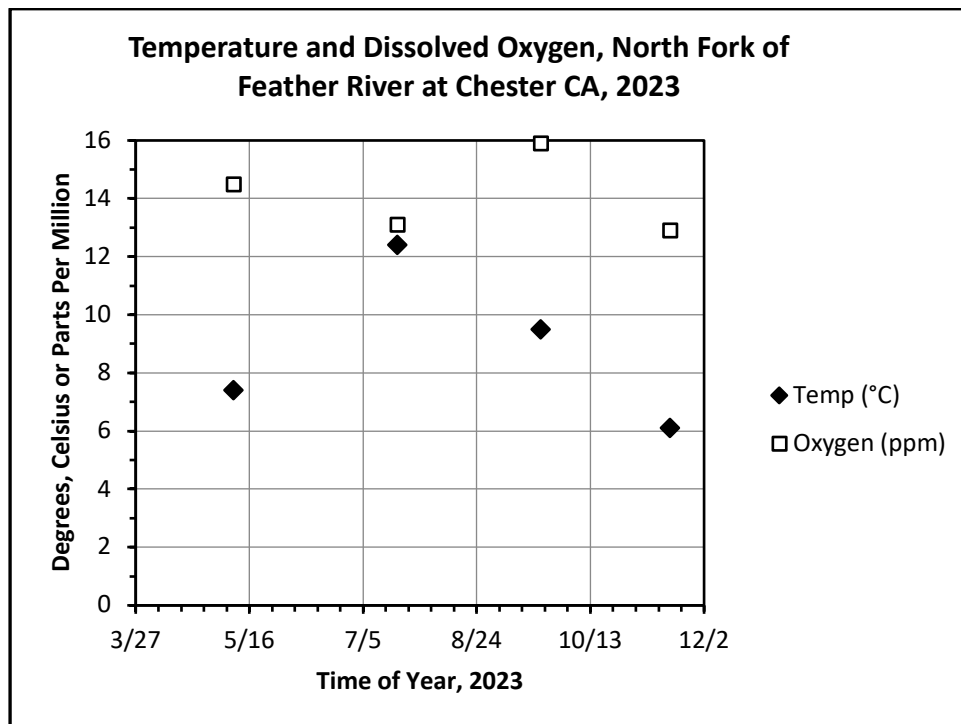
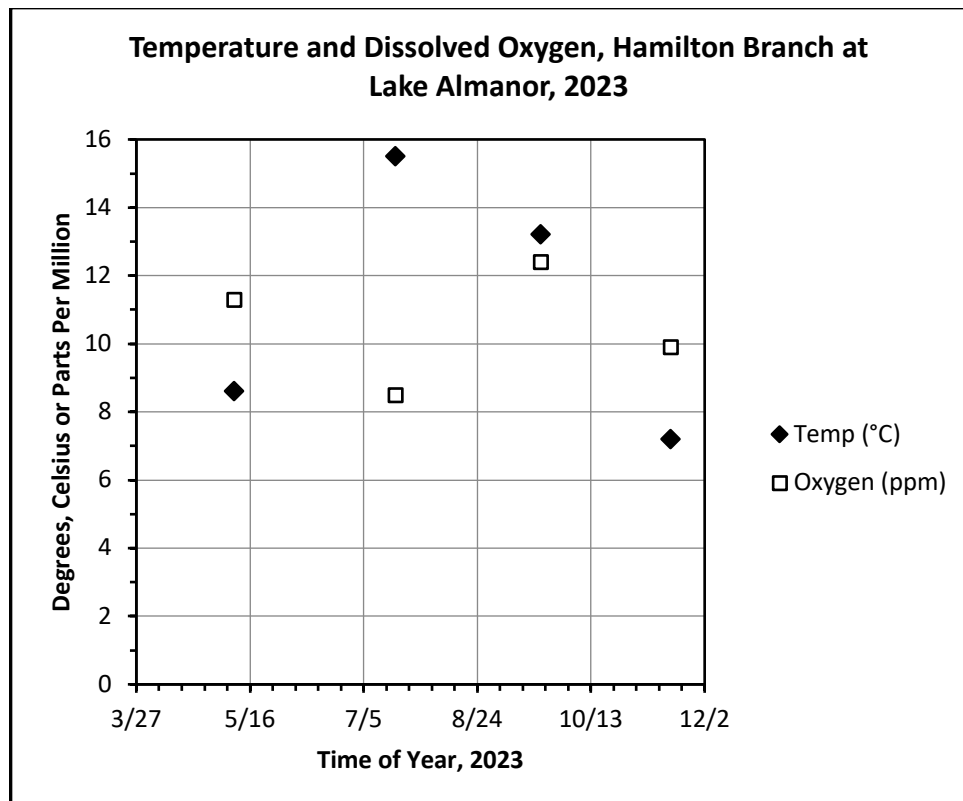


Figure 7. Temperature and Dissolved Oxygen, Hamilton Branch at Lake Almanor (HB-01A) During 2023





### c. Electrical Conductivity

Electrical or specific conductivity is a measure of the dissolved salts in water. The data for all stations are presented in Table 1 in the Appendix. Values ranged from 105-160 micro-mhos/cm at the lake stations and from 52-93 micro-mhos/cm in the North Fork Feather River. There was little difference between lake stations, although LA-03 tended to be lower, due to the influence of the river. The range of data is similar to that in the DWR database for 1989-2004. The values were gradually increasing since 2011 due to the decreased precipitation in the watershed, but decreased with increased precipitation in 2016 and 2017. In 2018 they increased again. The 2019 values were very similar to 2018 in May, but a little lower in July. The 2022 values were much higher for the lake stations, ranging from 146-277 micro-mhos/cm, due to the very dry year.

For the tributaries, Bailey Creek (BC-5) had the lowest conductivity (41  $\mu$ mhos/cm), although it stopped flowing after the May sampling. Hamilton Branch downstream of the Mountain Meadows Dam (HB-01C) historically had the highest value, but in 2023 Hamilton Branch at Lake Almanor (HB-01A) was generally a little higher. None of the Hamilton Branch stations was very high except at the November sampling when they ranged from 152-179 micro-mhos/cm. In 2022 the total range of conductivity values in the tributaries was 38-210  $\mu$ mhos/cm.

### d. Secchi Depth

Secchi depth is an indication of suspended particles in the water column, which could be algae or sediment. Data for Secchi depth are presented in Table 1 in the Appendix. At LA-02 Secchi depth was around 4 meters in May 2023, but only 2.6 meters at LA-03. It increased to 6 meters at LA-01 and to about 5.5 meters at LA-02 in July but was only about 4.4 meters at LA-03. In September it was about 5 meters at LA-01, but down to 4.3 meters at LA-02. There was a lot of phytoplankton present at LA-03 in May, so the low Secchi value could have been affected by that. Variation during the year is probably related to sediment carried by inflowing streams, pollen from vegetation, and the amount (biomass) of phytoplankton (usually lower Secchi depths in spring and fall, which correspond to higher phytoplankton populations). The high values in the summer were correlated with low phytoplankton populations. Values were generally in agreement with those in the DWR database and with the 2009 – 2022 studies.

## 2. Phytoplankton and Zooplankton

Phytoplankton samples were collected at LA-02 and LA-03 on four sampling dates. Data for the major groups of phytoplankton are presented in graphic form in **Figures 8 and 9**. More detailed data are in the Appendix, Table 2. The data are presented in two different graphs for each station. The first graph shows the number of algal cells or colonies per liter of lake water. The second graph shows the volume of algal cells per milliliter of lake water (cubic microns per milliliter). This way of showing the data is more representative of the amount (biomass) of algae present, since the size of individuals varies greatly. The number of cells per liter treats small and large cells equally. (Please note that the range for the vertical scale on the graph is not the same for LA-02 and LA-03.)

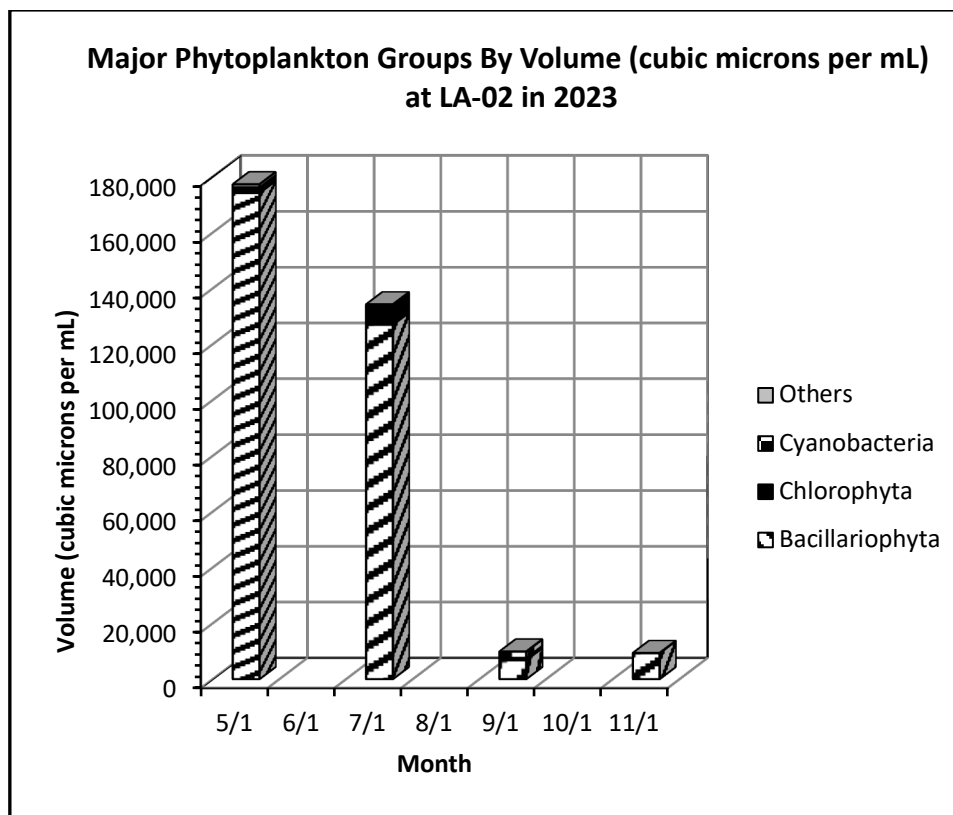
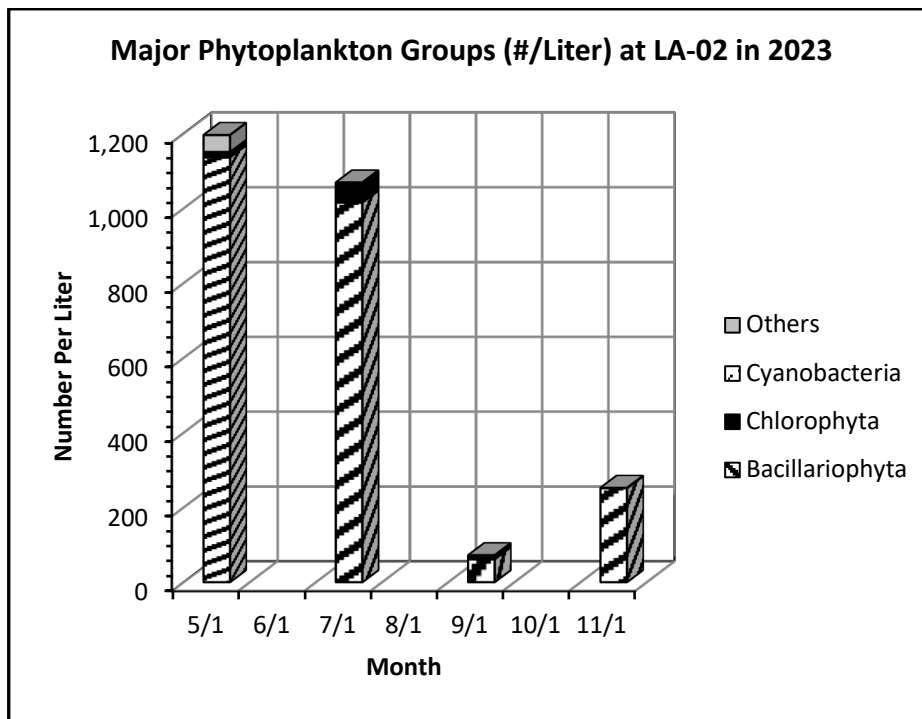
In May 2023 diatoms (Bacillariophyta) were the dominant forms at both LA-02 and LA-03, mostly *Fragilaria*, with *Asterionella*, *Aulacoseira*, and *Cyclotella* being numerous. There were some *Sphaerodinium* – a dinoflagellate genus at LA-02 and LA-03, as well as *Dictyosphaerium*, a green colonial genus (Chlorophyta) at LA-03. By mid-July the total number/liter and volume of algae had dropped at both stations. Bluegreen algae, primarily the genus *Lyngbya*, as well as some *Dolichospermum*, were present. (The genus *Lyngbya* forms filaments large enough to be seen with the naked eye and these may accumulate at the lake surface.) There were also low numbers of *Dictyosphaerium* at both stations. By September the algae at LA-02 were the same mix of diatoms, blue-green algae and some green algae (*Pleodorina* and *Eudorina*). Populations were a little higher than summer. At LA-03, diatoms were numerous, along with some bluegreens (mostly *Lyngbya* and *Dolichospermum*) and some green algae (*Pleodorina*, *Eudorina* and *Dictyosphaerium*). By November at LA-02, one genus of diatoms was still numerous, but it was small in size (*Asterionella*), so the biomass was low. This was true at LA-03, also, where *Asterionella* was very numerous, but total biomass was low.

Both LA-02 and LA-03 had their greatest volume of phytoplankton in May, prior to thermal stratification. Often, the greatest volume is in November, due to mixing of the lake, as well as the beginning of the rainy season and the first inflows in the Fall. This coincides with the time when blue-green algae are a large component of the population, since they thrive at warmer water temperatures. In 2023, the greatest populations were in the spring after a very dry year and then an extremely wet winter and spring with high inflows.

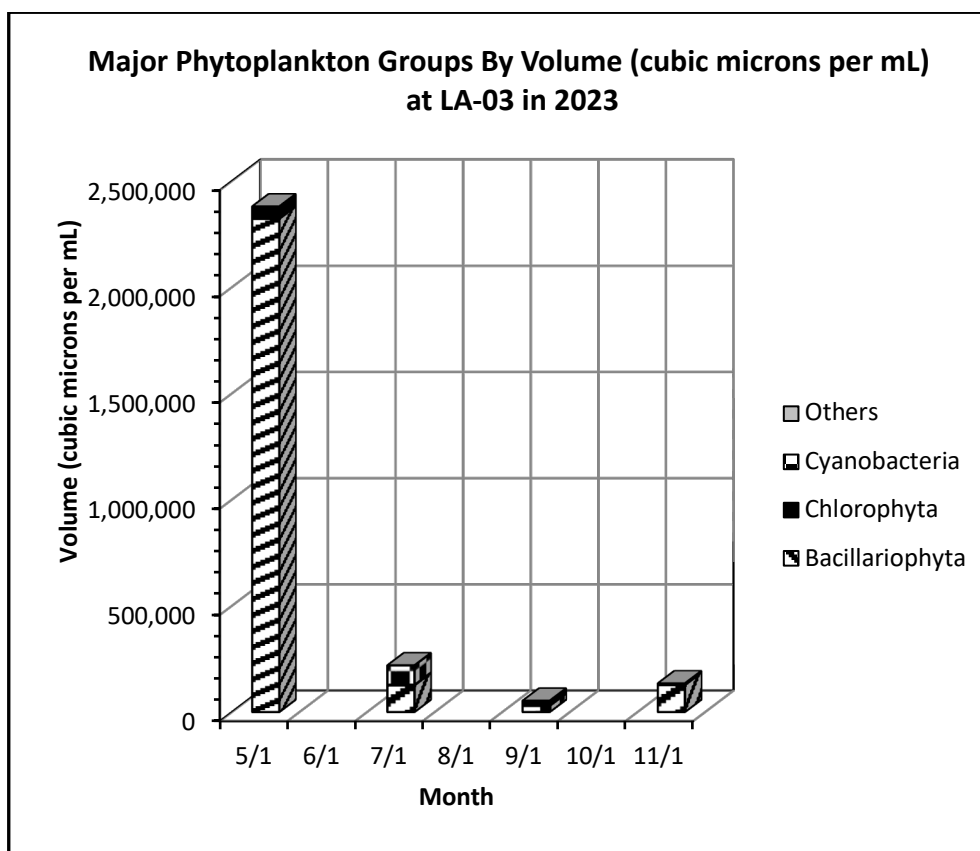
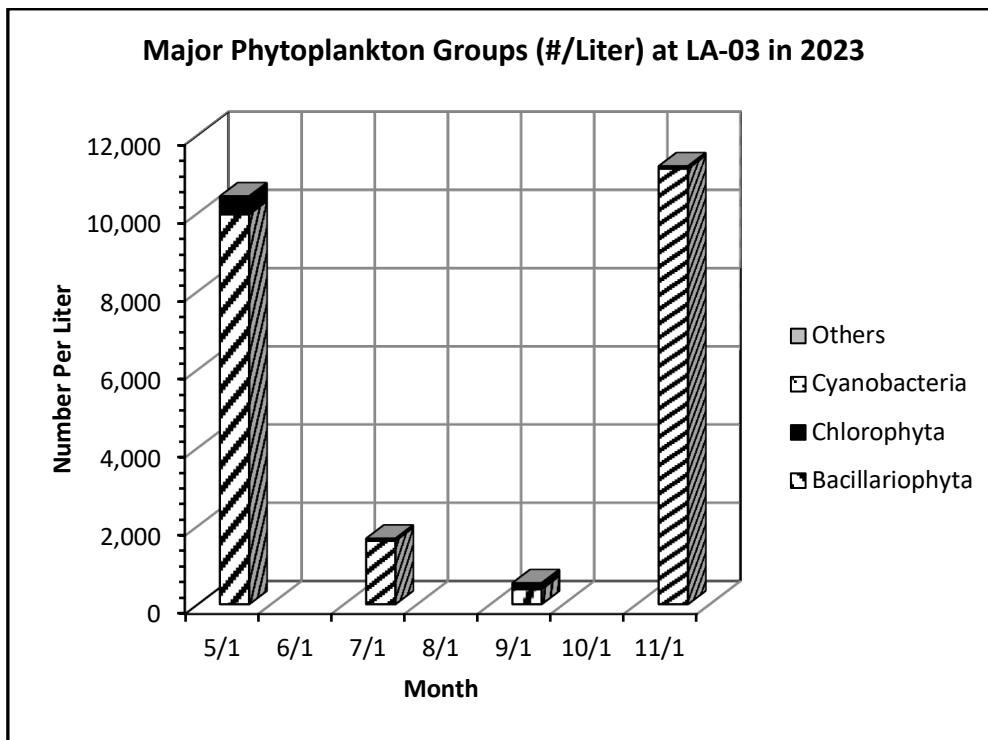
LA-03 always has a greater amount of algae than LA-02, probably because of warmer water temperatures and/or greater penetration of sunlight. The total number of algal cells/liter at LA-03 in May 2023 was five times greater than that at LA-02. The biovolume (cubic microns/milliliter) at LA-03 was twelve times greater. In 2022 the greatest amount of algae was also in the spring. At LA-02, the number per liter was less than in 2023, but the volume was about the same. At LA-03 the number per liter and the volume were much less than in 2023. (Note: A micron, or micrometer, is a millionth of a meter or one thousandth of a millimeter.)

The greater number of green and yellow-brown algae present at both stations is significant because these are the species that support the zooplankton, which then support larger organisms, such as insects and fish. Very few organisms feed on bluegreen algae, and these populations were low this year.

**Figure 8. Major Phytoplankton Groups at Lake Almanor, By Number/Liter and By Volume (cubic microns/milliliter), Station LA-02 in 2023**

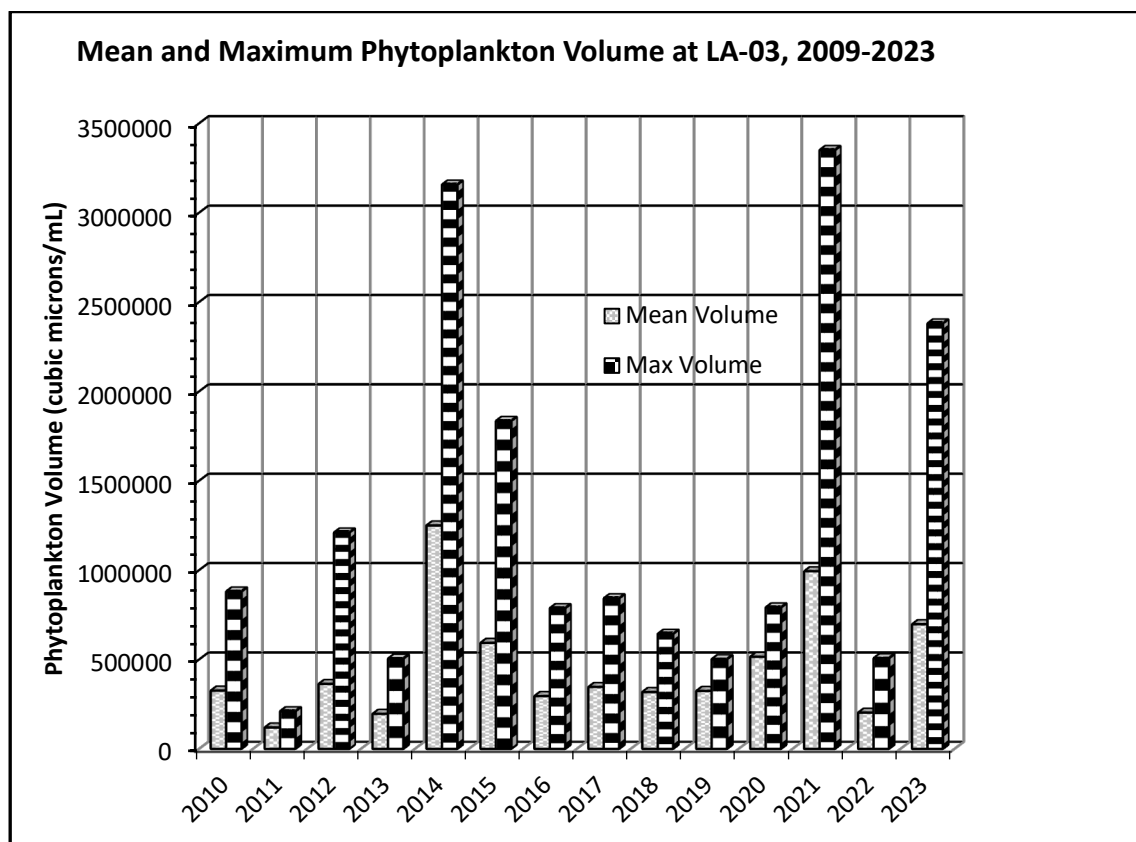
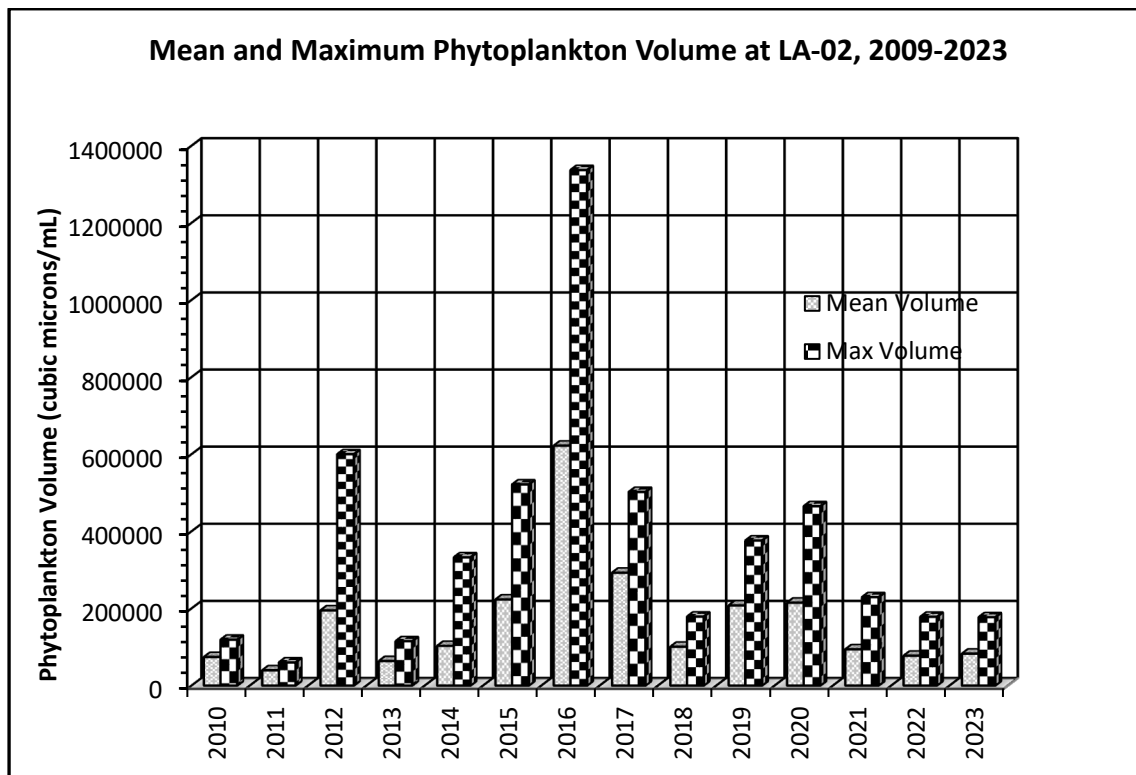


**Figure 9. Major Phytoplankton Groups at Lake Almanor, By Number/Liter and By Volume (cubic microns/milliliter), Station LA-03 in 2023**



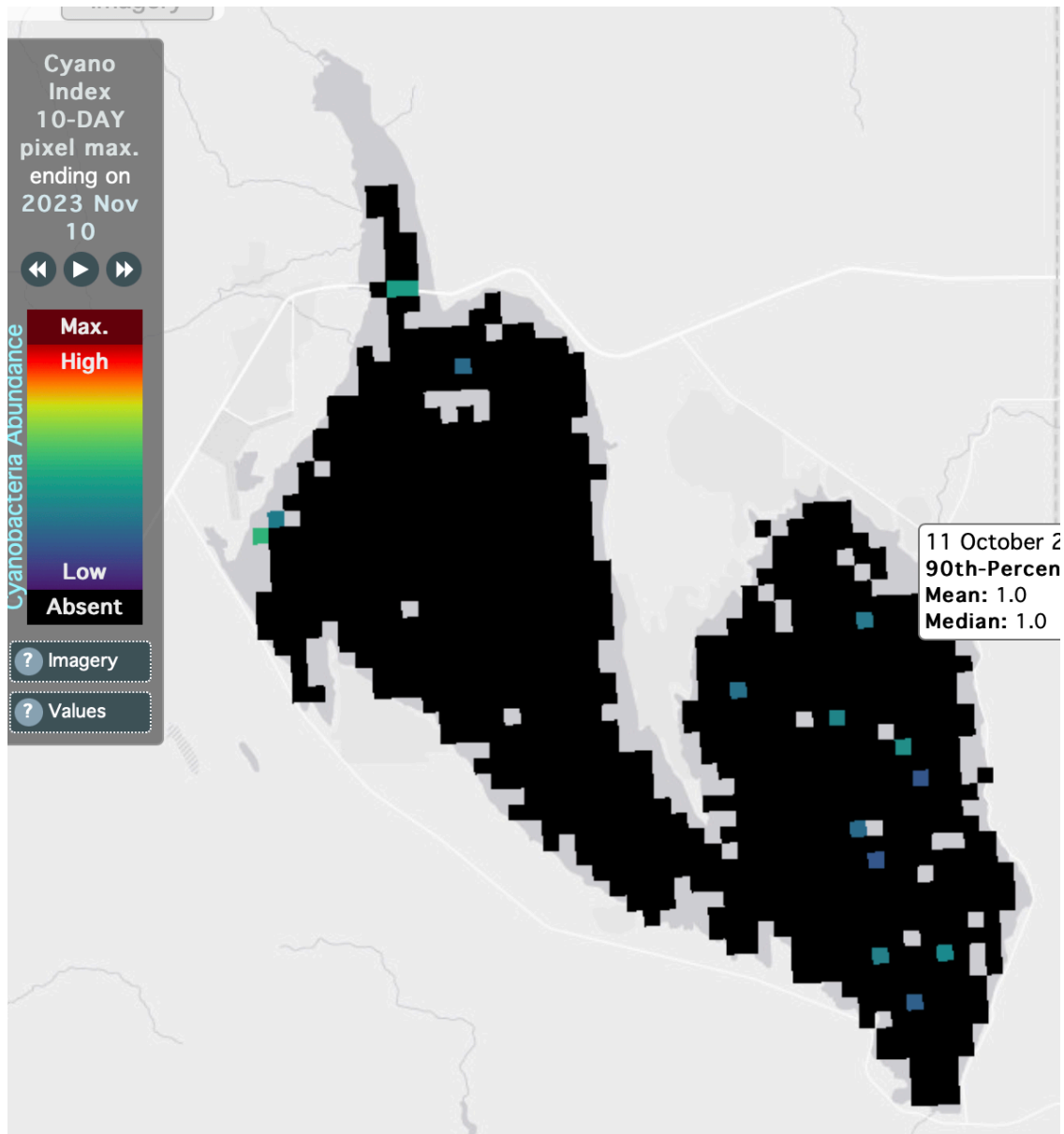
**Figure 10.** shows the mean and maximum amounts of phytoplankton by volume at LA-02 and LA-03 from 2009 to 2023. (Please note that the vertical scale for the two stations is not the same.) The maximum has generally been in November, but we were not able to sample in November 2020 or in 2022. As a result, the amount for these years is not comparable to the other values. At LA-02 the greatest amount was in April 2016, probably due to the emptying of Mountain Meadows Reservoir in Fall 2015. The volume of algae was increasing from 2013 to 2016, but had dropped back to less than its 2014 value. In 2019 and 2020 it was increasing again. At LA -03 the greatest volume in 2014 was six times the highest level in 2013 and was the highest in the previous five years. In 2015 values were only about 2/3 of those in 2014, and in 2016 the values were about half of 2015. The algal volume at LA-03 had been stable or decreasing slightly from 2015 – 2019, but increased in 2020 and then increased considerably in 2021. Diatoms (Bacillariophyta) were the most numerous in spring and fall, but blue-green algae have continued to increase in the summer and fall. The changing amount of algae overall was probably due to changes in nutrient input and water temperature, which were ultimately controlled by changes in precipitation. In recent years increased inflow from the North Fork Feather River has resulted in greater dilution at LA-03, but in 2020 - 2022 that dilution did not occur. With little to no spring runoff, LA-02 algal populations decreased in 2021 and 2022, but LA-03 populations increased dramatically in November, 2021. It is possible that the fire retardant applied all along the western shoreline and the subsequent rain event could have played a role in encouraging an algal bloom in the western basin. In 2023, cooling temperatures and increased inflows stimulated growth of diatoms and green algae, but not bluegreen algae, resulting in a high biovolume in November at LA-03. Biovolume at LA-02 was about the same as in 2022.

**Figure 10. Mean and Maximum Phytoplankton Volume at LA-02 and LA-03, 2009 – 2023**



The satellite imagery on the California State Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) website (<https://fhab.sfei.org>) did not show much bluegreen algal activity on the days preceding our sampling (November 10, 2023).

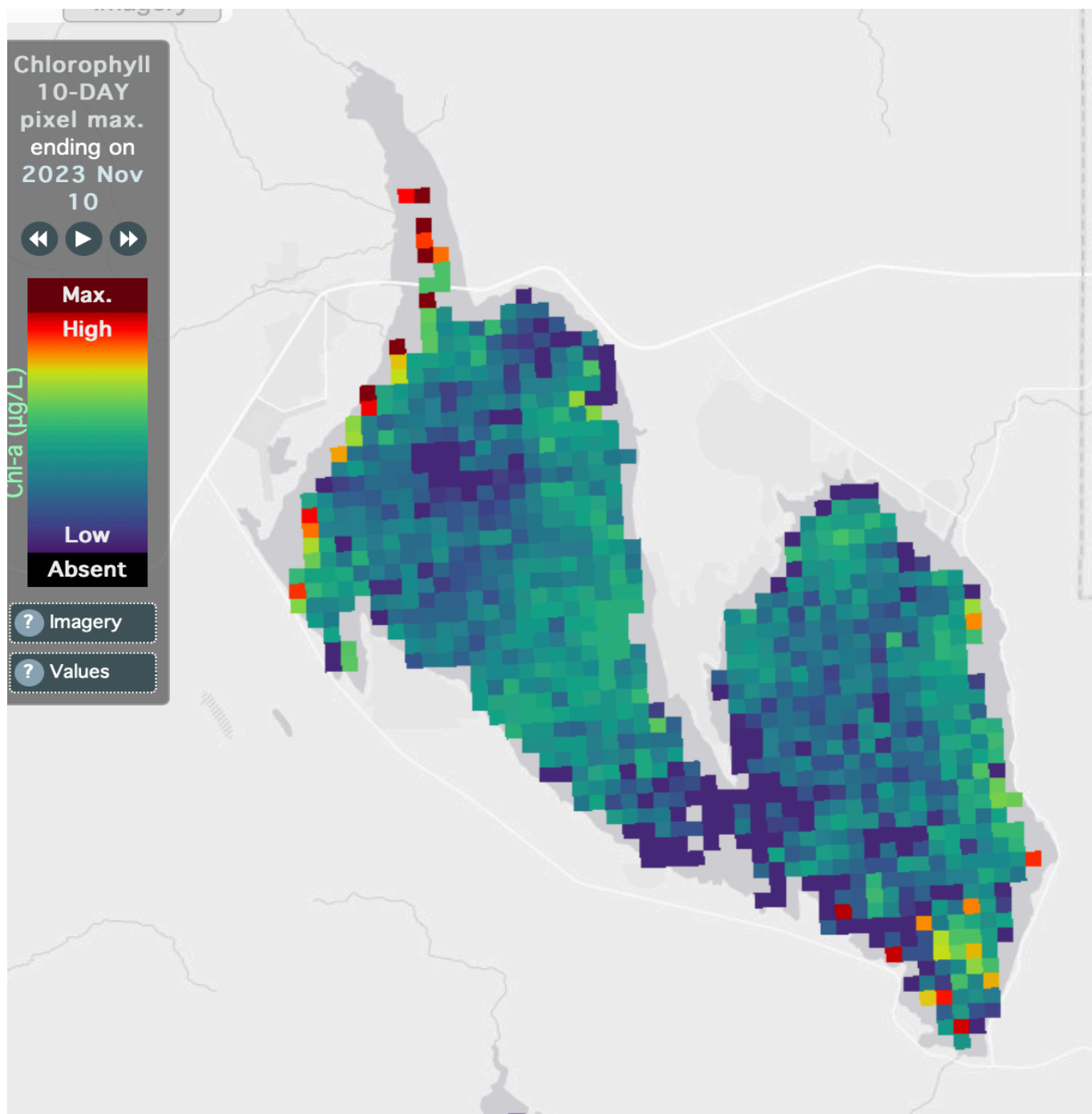
**Figure 11a. Ten-Day Composite Satellite Images of Lake Almanor, November 1 – November 10, 2023** ( Cyano Index- Yellow pixels indicate a denser population at that location)



However, there was a lot of green algae in the lake, as shown in the second figure. This image indicates the amount of chlorophyll-a, which corresponds to the biomass of green algae. The yellow-green color shows high amounts of green algae in the lower part of the western basin

and along the eastern peninsula during early November 2023. This agrees with our analysis of phytoplankton.

**Figure 11b. Ten-Day Composite Satellite Images of Lake Almanor, November 1 – November 10, 2023** (Chlorophyll-a Index- Yellow pixels indicate a denser population at that location)



There are no recent data from DWR concerning the phytoplankton, but some tables from the 1970's show that many of the same species were present then. The assemblage of genera is

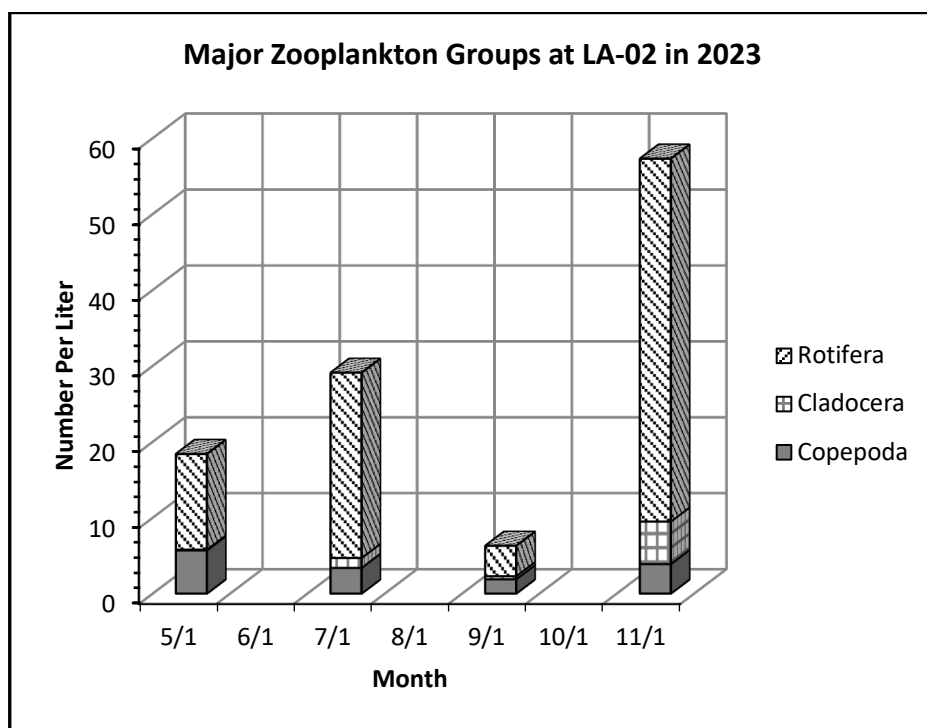


characteristic of meso-trophic lakes, meaning that the reservoir is showing signs of nutrient enrichment.

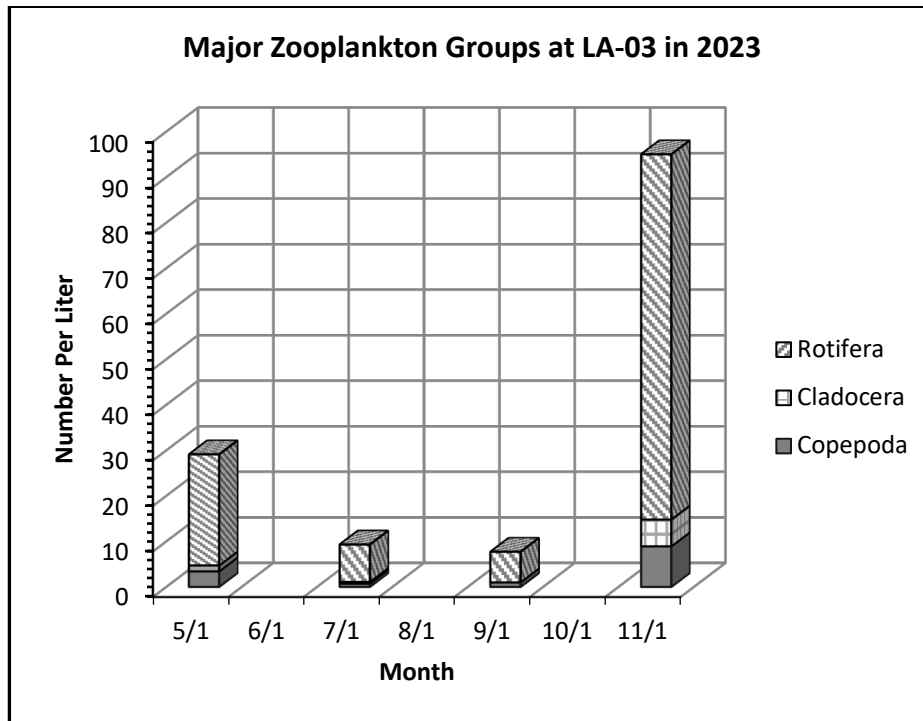
Zooplankton samples were collected along with the phytoplankton and results are presented in **Figures 12 and 13**. More detailed data are in the Appendix, Table 3.

Variation in zooplankton populations is largely a function of food supply – which algae are present, as well as water temperature and predation by carnivores. In 2022 low algal numbers was the main factor controlling population size and variety. The decrease in the zooplankton population, especially copepods and cladocerans, was significant because these organisms serve as the food supply for other carnivores in the lake- insects and small fish. In 2023 the zooplankton populations increased, especially the Rotifera, but also the Copepoda and Cladocera. This was likely due to the presence of more green algae (*Dictyosphaerium*, *Pleodorina*, and *Eudorina*) and more small diatoms (*Asterionella*), which can serve as their food supply. The number of zooplankton was nearly twice as great at LA-02 as it had been in 2022 and three times greater at LA-03. This greatly strengthened the overall food web.

**Figure 12. Major Zooplankton Groups (#/Liter) at Lake Almanor, Station LA- 02, 2023**



**Figure 13. Major Zooplankton Groups (#/Liter) at Lake Almanor, Station LA-03, in 2023**



## Conclusion

As discussed further below, water quality in 2023 was impacted by heavy snowfall in the basin leading to colder temperatures, high runoff and ultimately lower oxygen levels at depth in the reservoir. Zooplankton levels rebounded from earlier years likely due to higher algal populations, especially green algae and small diatoms. Very low to zero dissolved oxygen at depth meant the lake was inhospitable to cold-water fish from July -November. Very low populations of bluegreen algae were present in 2023.

The dissolved oxygen profiles at LA-01 and LA-02 were very different from previous years. My best guess is that considerable debris washed into the lake along with the snowmelt. A lot of soil from logging operations and other soil disturbances in the watershed may have made its way into the lake and then depleted dissolved oxygen in the deeper water of the eastern basin. Sediment from eroding soils contains organic matter that contributes to oxygen depletion in the water as it is decomposed. Usually the dissolved oxygen at LA-01 and LA-02 would be high throughout the water column in May and November, but that was not true in 2023.

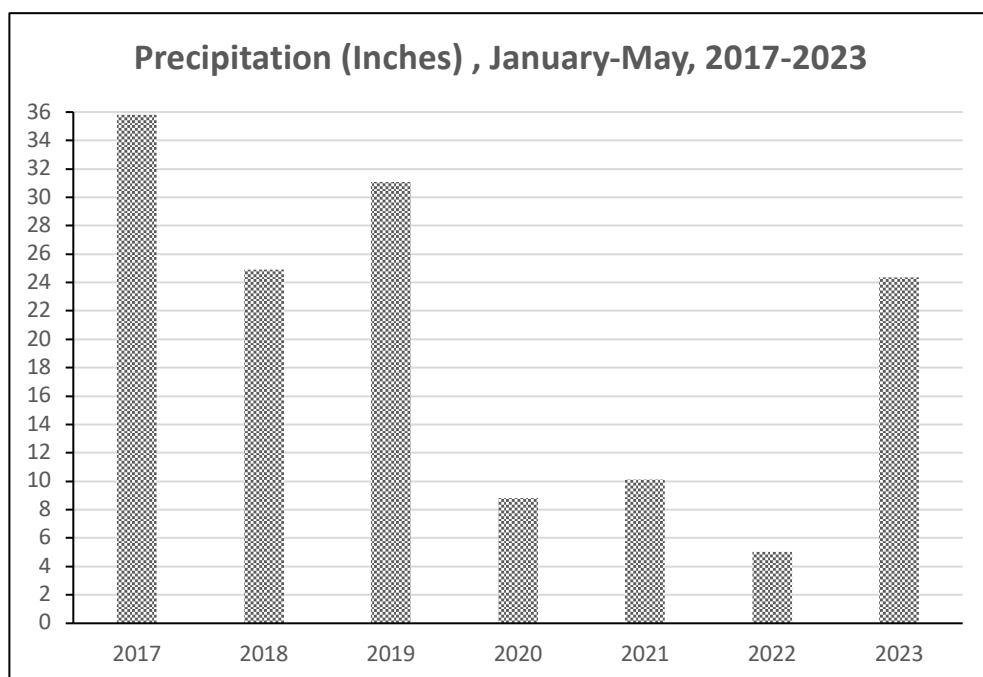
Lake Almanor is a reservoir that is undergoing many changes related to climate, land use and disasters like the Dixie Fire. Because of the lake's high elevation, the cooler water temperature and the short growing season limit some plant growth. However, the western basin is shallow and the water is warm in the summer. Phytoplankton and larger aquatic plants can become very numerous at this time of year. There are enough nutrients coming in from the river, streams or from human activities (septic tanks, golf courses, lawns, logging, etc.) to support abundant plant growth. As more homes are built in the watershed, the nutrient input will increase.

An extensive sampling program begun in 2009 by Johnston and McMurtry, continued by DWR from 2014 – 2020 and now supported by Johnston, McMurtry, Sierra Institute and LAWG volunteers, has provided physical, chemical and biological data for three lake stations and six major tributary sites. We can see the importance of variation in precipitation and the resultant inflow on in-lake processes, particularly the onset of thermal stratification and loss of dissolved oxygen in the hypolimnion.

The ideal water conditions for brown trout growth are temperatures of 10-15 °C (50 °F-59 °F) and dissolved oxygen concentration at greater than 9 ppm. They can tolerate conditions warmer than this and oxygen levels down to 5 ppm, but they become increasingly stressed, and as oxygen levels drop, they will seek areas of the lake where oxygen is more abundant. The hypolimnion of Lake Almanor becomes uninhabitable for brown trout every summer, due to loss of oxygen. The length of time without oxygen in the hypolimnion varies from year to year, depending on the amount and quality of spring inflow.

Spring 2019 was above normal in terms of precipitation, with over 30 inches of precipitation from January – May, compared to the norm of 20.3 inches (Source: California Data Exchange Center, Department of Water Resources, <https://cdec.water.ca.gov/>). However, 2020 - 2022 were very dry years, as shown in **Figure 14**. Total precipitation was less than 10 inches from January - May in 2020, 10 inches in 2021, and 5 inches in 2022. In 2023 the total was over 24 inches, but it was mostly snow. This snow accumulated on several inches that fell in November and December 2022, so that when it melted, all of the streams were running very high. Since the previous years were very dry, and the Dixie Fire created considerable debris, there was a lot of material available to erode (ash, loosened soil and logging debris). This impacted the dissolved oxygen in the eastern basin of the lake and may take some time to resolve, depending on the rate of flushing of the reservoir.

**Figure 14. Total Inches of Precipitation at Chester, CA From January – May 2017- 2023**



Continued sampling is needed to document and understand ongoing water quality changes. As precipitation and water needs change, water temperature and reservoir levels change. This creates new water quality conditions every year. The Dixie Fire has added a new set of variables to the ecosystem and we anticipate that its impacts will be considerable in the watershed for many years. Hopefully, a similar program of monitoring can be continued in 2024. We have a much better understanding of the reservoir ecosystem and its fragility than when we began the reservoir studies in 2009. The data that we have collected have given us a unique perspective of the reservoir and watershed dynamics and LAWG must be involved in the development of future monitoring programs by the county, state and PG&E.