WATER QUALITY REPORT · 2026

America’s cleanest and dirtiest lakes, ranked

A composite index of eight water-quality indicators across the largest lakes in the United States

IN BRIEF

Large American lakes are broadly clean; the exceptions are chemical, not biological

67

of 100 screened lakes had enough official data to be scored

8.4×

gap between the average score of the dirtiest ten and the cleanest ten

7 of 10

cleanest lakes sit in Northwest, Northern Rockies or Great Lakes basins

90×

the Great Salt Lake's mineral load versus the next-heaviest lake

WHAT THE STUDY MEASURED

Eight equally weighted indicators, scored out of ten

01
Dissolved oxygen

02
Ammonia

03
Lead

04
Phosphorus

05
Sulfate

06
Total dissolved solids

07
Turbidity

08
Deviation from pH 7

SAMPLING WINDOW

Most recent 12-month median, drawn from data reported January 2021 – July 2026

EXCLUSION RULE

Lakes reporting fewer than three indicators were excluded rather than imputed

THE CLEANEST LAKE IN AMERICA

Lake Chelan, Washington

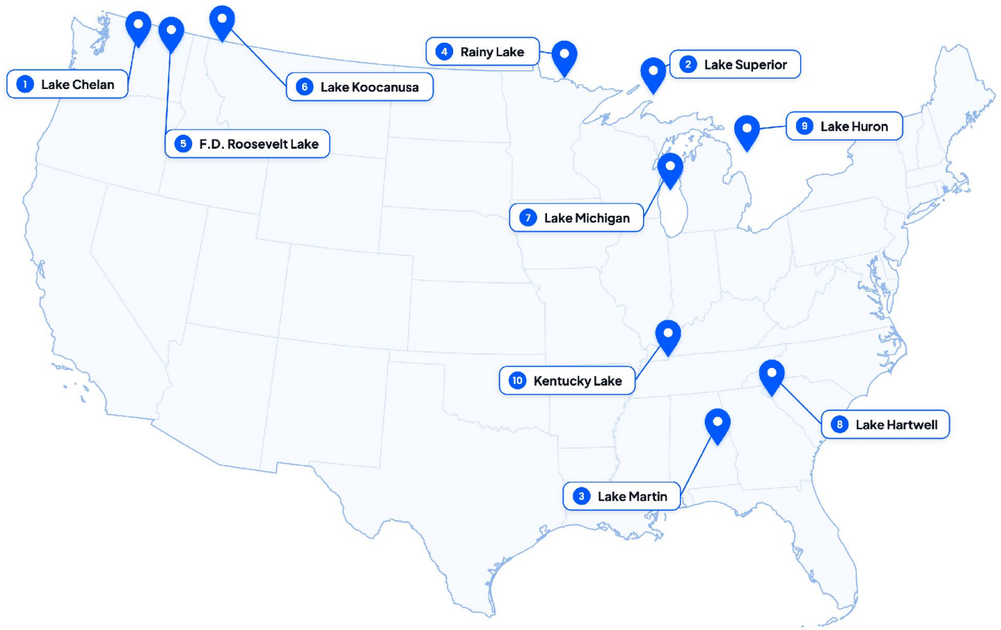
2.00 Turbidity, NTU

30.25 TDS, mg/L

Extremely clear water, one of the lowest mineral loads in the study, and low sulfate at 3.65 mg/L.

THE CLEANEST TEN

Washington’s Lake Chelan leads; the Northwest and Great Lakes account for seven of the ten



RANKING		SCORE /10
1	Lake Chelan	0.00
2	Lake Superior	0.28
3	Lake Martin	0.53
4	Rainy Lake	0.62
5	F.D. Roosevelt Lake	0.72
6	Lake Koocanusa	0.84
7	Lake Michigan	0.87
8	Lake Hartwell	1.01
9	Lake Huron	1.07
10	Kentucky Lake	1.08

THE CLEANEST TEN, BY INDICATOR

Cold, deep, well-flushed water: high oxygen, low minerals, low turbidity

#	Lake	State(s)	O_2 mg/L	Sulfate	TDS	Turbidity	Score
1	**Lake Chelan**	Washington	9.45	3.65	30.25	2.00	**0.00**
2	**Lake Superior**	MI–MN–WI–ON	10.58	12.20	74.00	0.54	**0.28**
3	**Lake Martin**	Alabama	8.15	—	29.00	1.28	**0.53**
4	**Rainy Lake**	MN–ON	8.85	1.95	45.00	—	**0.62**
5	**F.D. Roosevelt Lake**	Washington	9.95	9.72	89.83	1.36	**0.72**
6	**Lake Koocanusa**	BC–MT	9.85	25.90	152.75	1.60	**0.84**
7	**Lake Michigan**	IL–IN–MI–WI	10.60	24.00	183.00	1.17	**0.87**
8	**Lake Hartwell**	GA–SC	8.30	—	—	1.54	**1.01**
9	**Lake Huron**	MI–ON	9.73	18.00	199.00	3.45	**1.07**
10	**Kentucky Lake**	KY–TN	—	6.75	76.50	5.25	**1.08**

Source: Lake.com via the National Water Quality Monitoring Council. — indicates the measure was not reported.

THE DIRTIEST TEN

The Great Salt Lake is an outlier, not a trend: three full points above the next-dirtiest lake

RANKING		SCORE /10
1	Great Salt Lake	10.00
2	Lake McConaughy	6.97
3	Lake Winnebago	6.21
4	Lake Vermilion	5.75
5	Devils Lake	5.51
6	Lake Mattamuskeet	5.16
7	Truman Reservoir	5.11
8	Utah Lake	4.82
9	Clear Lake	4.80
10	Table Rock Lake	4.52

THE DIRTIEST TEN, BY INDICATOR

No lake ranks poorly on every measure — each placement is driven by one or two indicators

#	Lake	State(s)	O_2 mg/L	Sulfate	TDS	Turbidity	Score
1	**Great Salt Lake**	Utah	3.65	285.00	134,500	—	**10.00**
2	**Lake McConaughy**	Nebraska	5.59	—	—	5.50	**6.97**
3	**Lake Winnebago**	Wisconsin	8.46	—	—	—	**6.21**
4	**Lake Vermilion**	Minnesota	3.90	11.20	—	—	**5.75**
5	**Devils Lake**	North Dakota	9.22	639.00	1,490	—	**5.51**
6	**Lake Mattamuskeet**	North Carolina	—	—	—	23.50	**5.16**
7	**Truman Reservoir**	Missouri	7.92	—	—	—	**5.11**
8	**Utah Lake**	Utah	8.36	231.50	1,060	65.55	**4.82**
9	**Clear Lake**	California	7.08	9.69	180.40	13.70	**4.80**
10	**Table Rock Lake**	AR–MO	8.76	—	—	—	**4.52**

Source: Lake.com via the National Water Quality Monitoring Council. — indicates the measure was not reported.

DIRTIEST LAKE IN AMERICA

A terminal lake with nowhere to send its chemistry

134,500

TOTAL DISSOLVED SOLIDS, MG/L

Ninety times the next-heaviest lake in the index

3.65

DISSOLVED OXYGEN, MG/L

Lowest in the study; below 2.0 the lake turns hypoxic

0.92

AMMONIA, MG/L

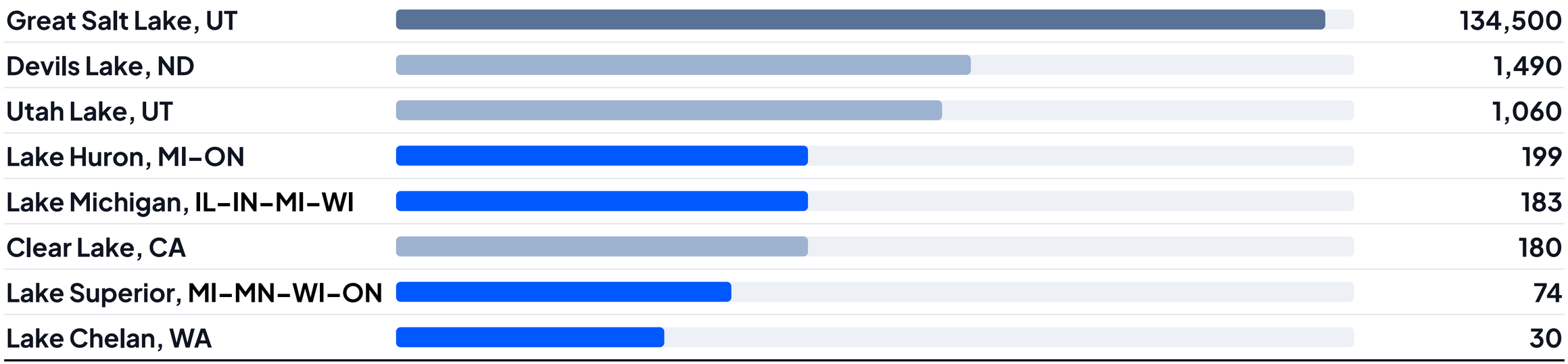
Highest of any lake in the dirtiest ten

The Great Salt Lake is not a freshwater lake, and it is terminal — there is no outlet for any mineral or chemical build-up. Its chemistry reflects hydrology, not upstream pollution.

MINERAL LOAD

Dissolved solids: two orders of magnitude beyond the rest of the index

Total dissolved solids, mg/L, plotted on a logarithmic scale



Note: Log scale; bar length is not proportional to value

BEYOND THE RANKING

Three single-indicator warnings worth reading separately

639

SULFATE MG/L · DEVILS LAKE, ND

The highest sulfate reading in the study, with no natural outlet to dilute it over time

17.2

LEAD MG/L · LAKE MOULTRIE, SC

Only eighteenth dirtiest overall, yet the most lead-contaminated lake in the study

0.67

AMMONIA MG/L · MATTAMUSKEET, NC

The highest ammonia of any freshwater lake in the top ten; above 0.53 it harms fish

GEOGRAPHY OF THE EXTREMES

Water chemistry follows hydrology: closed basins concentrate minerals, flushed basins do not

REGION	CLEANEST TEN	DIRTIEST TEN
Pacific Northwest & Northern Rockies	3	0
Great Lakes & Boundary Waters	4	2
Southeast & Interior South	3	1
Great Plains & Ozarks	0	4
Great Basin & West Coast	0	3

“America’s largest lakes remain, on the whole, clean and pleasant to swim in. Even the lakes at the top of our dirtiest table sit within the range you would expect for large natural bodies of water.”

“However, monitoring is uneven from one lake to the next, so anyone looking to visit — particularly swimmers — needs to check the signage near their local swimming spot.”

DAVID CICCARELLI · CEO, LAKE.COM

Lake™

TAKEAWAYS

Three practical reads for anyone using the index

01 Read the indicator, not the rank

A dirtiest-ten placement is usually driven by one measure; Lake Moultrie's lead reading matters more than its eighteenth-place finish.

02 Saline and terminal lakes are a different category

The Great Salt Lake's chemistry reflects having no outlet, not upstream pollution.

03 Uneven monitoring is the real gap

A third of America's hundred largest lakes could not be scored; closing that gap would change the ranking more than any single clean-up.

Read the full report

lake.com/company/reports/cleanest-and-dirtiest-lakes-in-america

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DATA SOURCE

National Water Quality Monitoring Council, via waterqualitydata.us

ATTRIBUTION

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