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Round Lake task force argues water level control system

Terrell Boettcher
 Sawyer County Record

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A multi-stakeholder task force, which is studying how Round Lake's water level should be managed to continue its highly-valued assets for everyone, is considering a "passive" control system.

At the task force's Aug. 9 meeting, a technical team said they have agreed that "we should focus on fixing the snowmobile trail (dam on Osprey Creek), removing beaver dams, lowering the Highway NN culverts (Osprey Creek) and changing the lake level order (issued by the Public Service Commission 65 years ago) to reflect this."

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The technical committee includes Dave Kafura, Frank Dallam, Tom Aartila and Paul Cunningham from the Department of Natural Resources, Dan Tyrolt of the LCO Tribal Conservation Department, and Sawyer County

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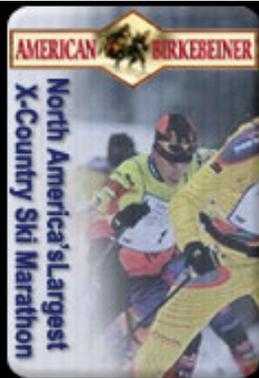
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Conservationist Dale Olson. Bill Whitlock of the Round Lake Property Owners Association (RLPOA) also attended the committee's meetings.

The task force also is considering the following options to recommend to the Sawyer County Board, Lac Courte Oreilles Tribal Governing Board and Department of Natural Resources:

- Eliminating the Lake Placid diversion canal with a permit from the DNR;
- Eliminating illegal wetland fill across Osprey Creek on Snowmobile Trail No. Three; the LCO Tribe has agreed to get this removed;
- Removing beaver dams on Osprey Creek and implementing a beaver control and inspection plan;
- Re-setting the culverts on Highway NN through which the north channel of Osprey Creek flows and installing designed and engineered "whistle tube" structures. A whistle tube would allow some control of water on Osprey Creek and possibly Round Lake, Olson said;
- Removing channel irons to make the Carlson Road wooden flow-through structure/dam passive.

Olson said these options would "retain control of Osprey Lake water levels, remove the 1941 SC order, 'naturalize' the stream channel, bring the county into compliance with DNR permitting and minimize liability" on the part of the county.

Tyrolt said other water impact points include a culvert on private property adjacent to Osprey Lake which may drain high water, and floating vegetation mats in front of the structure on Carlson Road which constrict flows during low-water periods.

"There is nothing we can do to control ground water flows," Tyrolt added.

DNR dam regulation specialist Frank Dallam said that the technical committee "decided to accept the datum and elevation that is on the permanent bench mark on the Little Round Lake dam and tie everything into that."

Another question the committee considered is "what water level is the public comfortable with," Tyrolt said. "We don't want to flood anybody out or dry anybody up so there's no access."

From 1949-2006, Round Lake has fluctuated 2 1/2 feet up and down (75.6 feet to 77.9 feet as measured on a gauge on the north end of the lake) Tyrolt

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said. In the past eight years, it has fluctuated 1.8 feet. The 1941 PSC order specifies a range of just three inches and is “not feasible,” the committee agreed.

Jamie Arnold, co-owner of Ran-D’s on Round Lake, said he is concerned about maintaining an adequate water level “so my customers can come to my restaurant.” He said the previous owner of the restaurant would adjust the boards on the Little Round Lake dam.

Tyrolt responded that when a new order is issued for an operating water level range, the outlet creek channel needs to be kept free-flowing to make it easier to maintain that range.

Resort owner Alan Reinemann said the county should not abandon the dam, because that would be “a total disregard of our property values.” He said that up until 10 years ago, the RLPOA would operate the boards on the dam themselves and “we didn’t have a problem. Most people on the lake would like to see conditions now like we had then, when the water was four to six inches higher than the 1941 order.

“We need a guarantee of a minimum amount of water so my guests can put their boats alongside the dock instead of at the end of the dock,” Reinemann said.

Olson said, “We do have to let water go downstream. In the past, we have done a poor job of doing that on many dams. Run of the river is pretty important. If we keep boards in and we get a gully-washing rain and we go over the (authorized) maximum, I don’t want to write another big check” to a shore owner. “That scares me a lot,” he said.

Dallam said the technical team’s recommendation “doesn’t change anything that’s existing except to maintain a minimum water level on Round Lake. The sill of the dam doesn’t control the elevation of the lake.”

Tyrolt said the recommended passive system will help alleviate high water, but won’t have much effect when there is low water. The one concern he has is that “Osprey Lake’s level could be lowered beyond what is reasonable for access on that lake” in a drought year. A whistle tube could alleviate that, he added.

DNR regional water regulation chief Tom Jerow said that “we view this as a local decision to be made by the county and the people who live here. If the decision is to try to control water levels through structures, we’re willing to work with folks and try to accomplish that.”

Whitlock said the Round Lake Property Owners Association is on record as

seeking protection against both low water and high water. The only method of protecting against low water is putting boards in the dam structure at Carlson Road, he said.

The lake hasn't experienced high water in the past 40 years, but when it comes, that will affect people's properties, Whitlock added: "If it goes up 2-3 feet even if just for a week, I think it will cause a lot of damage. If this (recommended) passive system is implemented, we would like to know what the engineers say about what a catastrophic rain would do to the water levels and for how long they would be high."

Dallam said a passive system "would remove the capability of maintaining a minimum level, and won't protect you against an extreme event.

"The PSC order right now is not manageable," said Stan Strainis. "Somewhere this group has to come up with a number that is manageable."

Dallam said that "the requirement to maintain the minimum flow (150 cfs at the Little Round Lake outlet) overrides the minimum (lake) level in that order. However, when you don't have the stop logs in, you don't have the capability of controlling the higher water levels."

"Stream morphology will be the ultimate factor" in how fast high water drains from the lake, assuming there is a control structure, Tyrolt said. "If people want to maintain a minimum level, that water will rise a lot faster than it can be discharged. Unless you want a 300-foot dam and a 200-foot channel dredged throughout the system, people will have to accept the possibility that there will be high-water damage."

Tyrolt added that the tribe is opposed to dredging the north drainage channel. The county has a 100-foot easement in that Highway NN area.

The task force will continue its discussion of what minimum and maximum water levels plus control structures to recommend to the governing bodies at its next meeting, to be conducted from 9 a.m. to noon Aug. 24 at the courthouse.

Jerow said that eventually there will be a public hearing, plus a decision from an administrative law judge as to what lake levels will be authorized. "If we have gone through a process where all the stakeholders are represented, the chances that the judge will agree with what the group has come up with are a lot better."

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