

County Land and Water Committee learns status of Round Lake watershed projects from DNR representative

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The Sawyer County Land and Water Committee on Tuesday received an update on the status of pending projects in the Round Lake watershed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Three central projects were discussed concerning the lowering of the Highway NN culverts, the formal abandonment of the Placid Lake dam and the Carlson Dam.

Lowering the culverts took the center stage, however, as DNR Northern Region Director John Gozdziński provided the committee an update on discussions with Brian Bisonette, the appointed contact for the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribal Governing Board (LCOTGB).

In late July, the DNR approved a permit allowing the county to lower the culverts, but a recent resolution from the LCOTGB opposing such action has stalled the process until Gozdziński and others, including Highway Commissioner Gary Gedart, can iron out the details.

According to Gozdziński, LCO requested further information about the downstream portion of the area beyond the culverts. Committee member Shirley Riedmann responded by saying LCO has had the information for over two months “with no response.” Riedmann seemed particularly concerned that the DNR issued the permit to lower the culverts without a formal response from the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission’s Voigt Task Force.

“We’re kind of stuck in the middle. The county has provided everything we were required to do in terms of the application, and we have property owners out there coming to us saying ‘you guys are dragging your feet,’” Riedmann said.

To that DNR Water Regulations Specialist Dave Kafura said the county has “no legal obligation to approach the Voigt Task Force ... the Department of Natural Resources is the sole authority for issuing and denying permits on navigable waters.”

However, according to Kafura, the DNR’s obligation is to ask for counsel with the Voigt Task Force and any affected tribes.

“We have a legal obligation to consult with the tribes,” said Gozdziński, “so if there’s

projects involving navigable waters, we are obligated to consult.”

Gozdzialski admitted that a DNR letter to the Voigt Task Force went unanswered, but that Voigt pointed the DNR in the direction of LCO, which has lingering concerns. Since that time, Gozdzialski said, he has had two separate conference calls with LCO.

“LCO has a resolution on file addressing multiple issues with the projects,” Gozdzialski continued. “They (LCO) are pretty firm in saying (they) don’t want to move forward until they get the (downstream) information. The conversations are considered formal consultations, which we’re obligated to do, (but) we’re going to hold until we can get that resolved.”

“They requested downstream data, and were provided downstream data, and that’s where it died,” said Gedart.

Gozdzialski said he was unaware that the county had supplied LCO with the information, adding he is willing to contact LCO immediately with the data in hand for more consultations.

Riedmann said she and others would be willing to present to the full LCOTGB on the entire project, but there has been no response from LCO.

Sawyer County Board Chairman Hal Helwig said open lines of communication are always helpful during such controversial projects as these, but added he would not hesitate contacting DNR Secretary Matt Frank to intervene if discussions should falter.

Lake Placid dam

Kafura said a draft environmental assessment (EA) is in the works for the formal abandonment of the Lake Placid dam. A final EA is essential, he said, when moving into the public hearing stage of the process.

“Once we have the draft completed, I will share it with the county and Tiger Cat and Round Lake associations,” Kafura said. “Once we have a final EA, we will have a public meeting both on the abandonment of the dam and the EA to move the process along.”

Kafura said the EA will only look at dam abandonment issues and will not encompass the entire watershed.

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