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County threatens to defy DNR, close dam on Lake Placid canal

by **Terrell Boettcher**
 News Editor

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Frustrated by a lack of action by the Department of Natural Resources on promised permits, the Sawyer County Land & Water Conservation Committee voted Monday to set a deadline of Aug. 24 or they would take unilateral action to close off the Lake Placid diversion dam and canal.

The canal was originally constructed in the late 1930s to serve as a possible source of additional water to Round Lake during times of drought. Lake Placid is a part of the Tiger Cat Flowage chain of lakes. Closing off the canal and diversion dam is supported by the Tiger Cat Property Owners Association but is opposed by the Round Lake Property Owners Association.

"I could go to jail if I do it without a (DNR) permit," said County Conservationist Dale Olson. "Maybe we all should go to jail, to make an issue out of this thing and get it done," said committee member Dean Pearson. "I have no problem with that."

The committee — consisting of Jim Bassett, Shirley Riedmann, Robert Vitcenda, Bernard Kadlec and Pearson — voted 5-0 to set an Aug. 24 deadline and to direct Olson to have the highway department close the dam and canal if the DNR does not respond by that time.

Iona Stover, a member of the Tiger Cat Flowage Property Owners Association, said Round Lake property owners have threatened to sue the DNR if the DNR closes the Lake Placid diversion structure. "But if they take all my water, why don't I sue 'em? It's so silly."

Kadlec said Sawyer County should work with other counties to address what they see as a lack of responsiveness from DNR officials, particularly on water management issues.

Last month, the committee heard a complaint from Exeland area farmer Scott Pasanen about lack of action on his irrigation permit application. Letters were sent to state officials and legislators, but none have yet responded, Olson said.

"The biggest issue is just we're just being told 'No' all the time without being given a reason," Olson said. "We've gotten zero information in three years" (on the Placid diversion issue).

The committee voted to invite DNR Secretary Matt Frank to the area to discuss the Sawyer County issues.

"We have some major issues with permitting. The process isn't working anymore," Riedmann said.

Tiger Cat vandalism

Olson reported that two weeks ago, neighbors of the Tiger Cat Flowage Dam noticed that vandals had "popped locks off" on the bars holding stoplogs in place on the dam. They threw the locks in the river below the dam and sent a stoplog downstream.

That night, a neighbor and Dave Neuswanger were able to drag the stoplog back in place, "so we didn't lose a lot of water," Olson added. "It wasn't a huge issue." He and others located both of the old locks in the river and had the locks replaced.

Olson said license plate numbers of suspects were turned into the sheriff's department twice, but there hasn't been a response yet.

Committee chairman Jim Bassett asked if "this was just a kids' mischief thing or somebody deliberately trying to reduce the water level?"

"The water was low already," said Stover.

Grimh Dam

A group from the Two Rivers Association at Radisson told the committee they also are frustrated with the DNR's handling of the Grimh Flowage situation. Several years ago, North Central Power Company applied to

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abandon the dam and the lake was drained, leaving shoreowners high and dry.

Town of Radisson chairman Phil Quade said he's been in contact with a prospective purchaser, who doesn't want the dam abandoned or else he wouldn't get a permit.

"The DNR wants a free-flowing river and that stinks," Quade said. "That structure is sound. It's built on granite. Property values are going down and that's terrible." Also, lack of a lake lessens the value of the newly-constructed ATV campground on Highway 40 next to the river, Quade added.

Quade said the prospective purchaser hired an engineering consultant to study the structure and determined it is structurally sound.

Also on Monday, the committee voted to postpone action on three bids received from engineering consultants to perform a dam failure analysis on the Nelson Lake Dam. The county does not need DNR permits on this, Olson said.

The work will include a stability analysis, the potential impact on downstream property owners if the dam were to fail, and establishment of base flood plain elevations on Nelson Lake.

The study is needed in order to apply for future state funds, Olson said.

The committee also voted to charge a fee for people making reservations to use the Hatchery Creek Park cabin, starting in 2010. Olson will return to the committee with a proposed fee structure.

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