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Engineer recommends new dam to control Round Lake water levels

Terrell Boettcher

Sawyer County Record

Thursday, March 29th, 2007 11:56:30 AM

A consulting engineer for Sawyer County is recommending that a new low-head dam be installed in the channel below Osprey Lake or that a wider dam replace the current structure at the outlet of Little Round Lake.

The purpose of the new structure would be to pass water downstream faster from the Round Lake Chain of Lakes during high rainfall events and to more capably hold back water during times of drought.

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Bernard Lenz of Short Elliott Hendrickson (SEH) out of Rice Lake unveiled the proposal last Thursday during a meeting of the Round Lake Management Task Force. The group includes representatives of Sawyer County, the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribe, the Department of Natural Resources, Round Lake Property Owners Association (RLPOA), Osprey Lake Shoreowners

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Association, Tiger Cat Flowage Property Owners Association and the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC).

Lenz's 22-page hydraulic controls study says beaver dams in Osprey Creek "have a large influence on the Round Lake Chain elevation due to the backwater they cause. To be effective, any active management of the Little Round Lake Dam boards (at Carlson Lane) would require the removal of beaver dams between Osprey Lake and Highway NN and the eradication of beavers responsible for the dams. This may not be a viable option for various reasons."

Also, beaver dams leak, are not permanent and may be washed away if abandoned by their builders, Lenz added. Thus, his recommendations are based on "the assumption that beaver dams may come and go."

To reliably maintain Round Lake's water elevations near the 1.75-foot range ordered by the Public Service Commission in 1941, Lenz recommends one of two options:

- A weir/dam below Osprey Lake to mimic beaver dams by raising Osprey Lake in times of drought and also the level of lakes behind it: Little Round and Round. This option would require dam permits and also flood easements as the structure would raise the 100-year flood elevation of Osprey Lake.
- A new dam about 30 feet wide at the outlet of Little Round Lake, which would only impact the levels of Round and Little Round. The current 10-foot wide dam opening (with installable boards to control water levels) is "undersized for high water events," Lenz said. A longer weir would allow a larger increase in outflow each time the lake rises. It would be designed to meet or exceed the capacity of the current downstream controls — the Osprey Creek channel and the Highway NN culverts (the culverts are the main control in times of high water).

A notch in the new dam would be required to provide "run of the river" flows to avoid "stealing" of water from Osprey Lake and the downstream watershed during extreme low flow periods, Lenz added.

Even with the larger dam capacity at the Little Round outlet, backwater from beaver dams could still be the controlling factor if those dams are higher than the new dam/weir, Lenz indicated. The possibility of removing the beaver dams or controlling their height when their backwaters increase the risk of flooding on Round Lake should be discussed with the LCO Tribe, he said.

Also, since the Highway NN culverts create backwater, state administrative code requires that these culverts be lowered or their capacity increased so they can pass water up to and including the 100-year rainfall flood event —

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Columnists

reducing the risk of lake flooding, Lenz said.

Alternatively, the culverts can be permitted as a dam. Either option would impact Round Lake's water level only at the highest lake stages, he added.

Lenz also recommends the adoption of ordinances to limit impervious surfaces and runoff around the chain of lakes to reduce the impact of sudden inflows of rainfall on the lake chain with its limited ability to pass massive amounts of water downstream.

Finally, "care should be taken to consider the impacts of draining too much water from the system too quickly," Lenz said. "Since the risk of damage from high lake levels is far more significant than that of low lake levels, erring on the side of passing the most water is prudent.

"The design (of new control structures) would maximize the flow at extremely high water conditions, minimize low to natural 'run of the river' during low-water conditions, but weigh the need for a balance of flood control and storage for low water times," Lenz added.

"The final design will need to consider the level acceptance of the county, tribe, state and lake residents to the consequences of manipulating hydraulic controls in the system."

Flood level discussion

A "100-year rain event" of six inches in 24 hours results in 10-inch upward "bounce" in Round Lake's water level, Lenz said. The maximum possible current flow through the Little Round Lake Dam at Carlson Lane is 71 cubic feet per second (cfs). Over a 24-hour period, that peak flow would drop the lake one-half inch, he said.

"There's not a lot of ways you can get rid of that water (from the rainfall) rapidly," he added. "But over time, you can manipulate the lake level."

Most of the time, beaver dams control the flow out of Osprey Lake — up to 78 cfs, Lenz added. When the water level gets higher than that (a 100-year rainfall event), the culverts carrying Osprey Creek beneath Highway NN become the control.

Round Lake flows into Little Round, which then flows through a channel into Osprey Lake and from there through Osprey Creek and eventually into Lac Courte Oreilles.

The boards in the current Little Round Lake dam allow some control of water

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passage once the lake level is at or above the maximum ordered by the PSC in 1941, Lenz said. That maximum level is 77.25 feet local datum or 1345 MSL.

Lenz said if the beaver dams were not there, Osprey Lake would be two feet lower. If the NN culverts were not there, Osprey Lake would drop another six inches. So the beaver dams are “very significant at low flows. They don’t affect the lake elevation too much at high flows.”

DNR dam regulation specialist Frank Dallam said the agency considers the twin NN culverts to be a dam, because when they were first installed “it was to maintain a higher lake elevation (than what) had resulted from the lowering from the last project when (the county and DNR) dynamited the channel to clear it.” That resulted in significant lowering of Osprey Lake, causing concerns. So the county then installed culverts at Highway NN to raise the water back up.

Another question not yet studied is if the culverts were removed, the beaver dams would still be the control or if the downstream channel would be scoured out, Dallam added.

An RLPOA member asked “how we can get the water level back up. It’s now at least one foot below the minimum” established by the Public Service Commission back in 1941, he said.

County Conservationist Dale Olson said that “we have boards in (the Little Round Lake dam) now, trying to catch some of the runoff” from the snowmelt. Lenz said that getting the lake as low as possible “maximizes your flood protection. You have more storage available to keep flooding from occurring. Those (goals) have to be balanced with each other.”

Dallam said that “anything you do” such as letting water out to lower the lake will affect someone else (downstream) “so you have to get their permission to do it. It’s not like the 1940s, where a couple resort owners would go in and do what they wanted, flushing it down on someone else. Nowadays with the price of property everybody’s got a legitimate concern, which is a part of what this work group (is studying).”

Lenz said a historical channel from the east end of Little Round to Osprey is rough, long and almost flat and has very little ability to flow water in high-water events. A private road crosses the channel with a 12-inch culvert allowing water flow. About 800 feet downstream of this culvert, there is an earthen berm one foot high.

DNR water regulation specialist Dave Kafura said even if the water level rose to 78 feet (flood stage), a lot of vegetation will absorb water before water

could flow through that channel.

Questioned by RLPOA President Bob Strachota as to whether it's possible to manage Round Lake's water level within the 2.5-foot range (1344 MSL to 1346.5) specified in the 1941 order, Lenz replied that "When it rains, that lake is going to 'bounce' and that bounce is very hard to control. It's such a big lake with such a small outlet."

Strachota said engineers should model what's happened with the lake in the last 25 years.

Kafura said the technical task force has recorded lake elevations for that period. But, he added, "I don't think anyone has modeled the effect of beaver dams (on the lake's outflows) for the last 25 years; it's not possible."

Strachota said, "This is a very big issue on Round Lake." The new SEH proposal is "a step in the right direction," he added. The membership of the RLPOA (which includes about half of the property owners on Round Lake) overwhelmingly opposes abandoning the Little Round Lake Dam, he added.

The latest SEH proposal will be presented to the LCO Tribal Council and the Sawyer County Board for discussion.

The tribal representatives at last Thursday's meeting were council member Mic Isham, attorney Kris Goodwill and environmental engineer Dan Tyrolt.

Isham and Goodwill expressed concerns about the potential downstream impacts on the reservation of the SEH proposal, such as scouring. They said further studies are needed.

Shirley Riedmann will discuss the SEH study and recommendation at the county board's April 17 meeting.

The Round Lake Management Task Force's next meeting will be at 9 a.m. April 19 at the DNR Service Center. Riedmann said the goal is to hold public information meetings this summer.

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