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Lake Placid dam removal debated at hearing

by **Terrell Boettcher**
News Editor

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Sawyer County's proposal to remove the 71-year-old water diversion canal and dam between Lake Placid and Round Lake drew a variety of comments at an Oct. 14 public hearing conducted by the Department of Natural Resources.

The project would include demolition and removal of the concrete spillway dam, the 250-foot long by 30-foot wide concrete diversion channel, a lagoon above the dam, and the collapsed 30-inch diameter, 136-foot long metal culvert under McClaine Road. After excavation, the site would be backfilled.

The county says it wishes to restore natural drainage of surface water in the Chief River system and will convert the excavated area to an upland hardwood forest. DNR Water Management Specialist Dave Kafura said the department has made a tentative determination that it will grant a permit/approval to the county for the proposed removal/abandonment.

He is taking written comments on the proposal through Nov. 5, after which he will issue a decision.

Sawyer County Zoning and Conservation Administrator Dale Olson said the county has sought to remove the structure since

2001. "It has never been used," he said. "It has never run water into Round Lake."

The county contracted with SEH to design the removal and abandonment project. The DNR fishery crew removed numerous small bluegills from the canal and Olson put a screen in front of the pipe that runs beneath McClaine Road "so we wouldn't have to worry about fish traveling from Placid Lake into the canal," Olson said.

The county is mandated by the state to keep water at a certain level in the Tiger Cat Flowage, which includes Placid Lake, Olson said. Mixing water from the Tiger Cat with water in Round Lake could introduce invasive species such as purple loosestrife into Round, he added.

Historic surveys

Kafura said historic surveys and aerial photos show that there were no streambeds or navigable waterways between Placid Lake and Round Lake prior to the construction of the dam and canal. The canal was dug 13 feet below the surface of the ground.

The DNR completed an environmental assessment (EA) for the removal of the structure, which is considered a large dam, Kafura said. The EA went out for public comment last February.

"We have determined that the county's application is complete," he added.

Area resident Jim Henchel said the Placid dam was put in as a diversion in case work was necessary on the Tiger Cat Dam.

"If you take the Placid dam out of there, it will cost a lot more money to block that water" at the Tiger Cat Dam, he said.

Henchel suggested replacing the current culvert with a smaller one surrounded by concrete, and putting a gate in the culvert if needed. "I think you (the county) will unnecessarily spend a lot of money on something that hasn't cost 10 cents in 100 years," he added.

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Speaking in favor of removing the structure, Conservation and Zoning Committee member Jim Bassett said "I believe this canal — although it was done with good intentions — will lead to messing with Mother Nature. It's dangerous to mix water from different watersheds. The watershed (of Round Lake) goes down through Lac Courte Oreilles and ends up in the Couderay River. Diverting water from the Tiger Cat could pollute, introduce invasive species into other watersheds that are now clear."

Round Lake Property Owners Association (RLPOA) board member Jim Purdin said the association is opposed to removing the Placid diversion structures. Purdin said RLPOA's major concern is that the proposed removal "needs to be put into the context of an overall plan that deals with the management of the water levels and the rest of the control structures."

Purdin asked if there is a process or rules governing the management of these dams (including the Tiger Cat Dam) for the purposes that they originally were built.

Kafura replied that in 1937 Sawyer County petitioned the Public Service Commission for two items: Creation of the Tiger Cat Flowage by constructing a dam and of channels between Burns Lake and Placid Lake; and creation of the Placid Lake diversion channel and dam to discharge surplus water from the Tiger Cat Flowage into Round Lake. Both applications were granted.

The county is required to maintain a flow of the Chief River though the Tiger Cat Dam to feed Callahan/Mud Lake and the Chippewa Flowage downstream, Kafura added.

1984 PSC decision

In 1949 and again in 1984, the county petitioned the state to increase the levels of the Tiger Cat Flowage. The 1984 decision maintains a run-of-river as per the original order and also sets a minimum water level of 90.84 and maximum of 91.34, with considerations for major rainfalls and major droughts, he said.

In 1941, the county asked the PSC to determine the "normal water level" of Round Lake. The PSC established a normal level of 77.00 feet and a maximum of 77.5 in spring freshets and runoff. The order also provided for water relief through a dam at the outlet of Little Round Lake, which feeds a man-made channel between Little Round and Osprey Lakes.

"There are circumstances conceivably where boards can be removed to let water through if you're in compliance" with the water level orders on both Round Lake and the Tiger Cat, Kafura added.

Round Lake resident Tom Kintzinger said water has flowed or leaked through the dam and diversion channel between Lake Placid and Round Lake for 60 to 70 years and represents 30 percent to 40 percent of the surface water inflow into Round Lake. The cumulative effect over the years "is significant," he said.

"Round Lake is still at least a foot low, and most of the flowages are normal," Kintzinger added.

There is "no proven evidence that invasive species have spread from the Tiger Cat to Round Lake," Kintzinger added. He questioned why the county is spending \$100,000 in a time of tight money, and said several hundred people have signed petitions opposing the Placid Dam removal.

Kintzinger said the 1941 PSC water level order states there are two sloughs connecting Placid and Round lakes, and said there is evidence that Placid Lake drains into Round Lake.

Osprey Lake Property Owners Association President P.J. Schaefer said that Osprey shore residents "are downstream of everybody else and we're concerned that nothing will be left coming our way." Kafura said there is no established water level for Osprey Lake.

Kafura said the county's petition to remove the Placid structure has nothing to do with the Carlson Road Dam.

Schaefer said a 2003 survey of Round Lake residents revealed that 60 percent of the respondents "said let Mother Nature be. Another 25 percent said revise the lawful levels based on the current normal variations. That's 80 percent who said let's do something based on current levels, not 1941 or 1937."

Attorney David Anderson of Eau Claire spoke on behalf of the owners of 35 acres, including the land where the Placid Dam and canal are located and 700 feet of frontage on Round Lake. He said one of their concerns is, "If that water ever breaks loose from Placid Lake, it would wipe out more than four buildings on the Gold Family Trust property and their entire shoreline." Also, the excavation of the Placid structures "would create a huge mess," he said.

Olson responded that the removal and abandonment plan and specifications were prepared by Short Elliott Hendrickson (SEH). The county highway department, which will do the excavation and structure removal, has "done earthworks projects many times" and "will take the liability," he added.

No significant danger

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Kafura said that in contrast to Lake Delton, which washed out a couple years ago in severe flooding, there is much less hydraulic pressure at Lake Placid. "Failure, while possible, is highly unlikely to be catastrophic. The culvert (beneath McClaine Road) is a bigger concern. It's in poor shape."

Kafura said the canal is not considered a navigable water, but is a man-made diversion canal. There is a "linkage" between Placid and Round, "but it's not a great cumulative impact on Round Lake from the standpoint of quantity," he added. The removal of the Placid Dam poses "no significant danger" to the Gold property, he said.

Round Lake resident Sue Kintzinger said she's concerned that "there is no comprehensive plan for Round Lake. You're willing to close off one source of water. It might be inches, and if you live on Round Lake, inches are a big deal. We're upset that even inches of water potentially could be taken from us, because they do make a difference. The low water that we're experiencing is definitely affecting our property values."

Something also will have to be done with the Carlson Road Dam eventually, Kintzinger added.

Representing the Tiger Cat Flowage Association, Robert Olson said they are "strongly in favor" of removing and abandoning the Placid culvert, channel and dam.

"We've gone through a tough four years with the drought, and if you're going to follow the orders for run-of-river and the Tiger Cat water level, there's not going to be any surplus water. We're still not back to normal. They're two (different) watersheds, and let the folks on Round Lake manage their watershed the best they can. We will manage our watershed the best we can."

Round Lake resort owner and RLPOA member Alan Reinemann said he doesn't want fish or water coming from the Tiger Cat into Round Lake. But he's concerned that in the future, "that (Placid) Dam might be useful to Round Lake. Maybe we shouldn't make a decision today." The culvert should be repaired, he added.

Reinemann said that in 1977, Union Carbide and International Minerals expressed their intentions to drain the Tiger Cat Flowage and mine under it. As far as he knows, they still have the mineral leases, he said.

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