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County workgroup advises replacing Little Round Lake dam

by Terrell Boettcher
 News Editor

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The ups and downs of Round Lake water levels continue.

Looking to better manage high and low water on the Round Lake chain, a Sawyer County task force has recommended replacing the Little Round Lake dam at Carlson Road, lowering Osprey Creek culverts beneath Highway NN by 1.2 feet, and petitioning the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to abandon a 70-year-old order which set high and low water levels on Round Lake.

Task force chairman and county board member Bruce Paulsen presented a report to the county's Zoning and Conservation Committee on Feb. 9. The task force, consisting of Paulsen, Chuck Gunderson, County Clerk Kris Mayberry and County Conservation and Zoning Administrator Dale Olson, met with engineering consultant Short Elliott Hendrickson (SEH) to look at the options. Paulsen explained that the recommended actions are for a

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"passive" system, because with the large amount of water in the lakes and only a 2.4-foot drop in the 1.8 miles between the Little Round Lake dam and Highway NN, it is "very difficult, if not virtually impossible, to effectively manage the day-to-day levels of these lakes." But the recommended actions would decrease the drawdown time during times of low water and increase the amount of

water passed during times of high water, they said.

Specifically, the task force recommends:

- Removing the existing Little Round Lake dam/bridge on Carlson Road and replacing it with a reinforced concrete box culvert 12 feet wide and 7 feet high with an elevation set at 1,343.8 feet. This elevation reflects the physical restrictions in the Osprey Creek stream bed downstream. The new structure would have more capacity to pass water than the current structure, which will need major repair or replacement within five years. The task force recommends leaving the creek as is.

- Lowering the Highway NN culverts by 1.2 feet to 1,314.4 elevation with the first four inches buried, resulting in a net 0.8 feet lowering. This will match the riffle downstream from the culverts and will allow more water to leave the system in times of high water. Also, the county will consult with the LCO Tribe about the feasibility of improving wild rice production in the portion of creek near the culverts. Wild rice destroyed during the construction will be restored.

- Petitioning the DNR to abandon the state Public Service Commission order issued in 1941, which set the low at 1,344.75 and the high at 1,345.

If the DNR doesn't approve abandoning the 1941 order, the task force recommends that depending on a legal review, the county alternatively petition the DNR to set the sill of the Little Round Lake dam at 1,343.8 feet—0.1 foot higher than it is now. The DNR has set a maximum high for the sill of 1,345.02.

The 1941 order is "impossible to enforce," said committee member Fred Zietlow.

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out in the future that we need more of a control structure there, a box dam would be perfect to drill some holes and put steel in to hold the support boards."

Reinemann said "a lot of people from Round Lake would support" the proposal to increase the water volume and raise the sill of the structure. "We all understand there's only so much we can do with that whole system. The concern of the majority of the property owners is to try to maintain a little more elevation before the summer depletes all the water again. If you can just slow that down a little, I think that's all we can ever expect."

RLPOA board member Wally Narr said the biggest concern at the last association membership meeting was low water and retaining as much in the lake as possible. Those who are hurting the worst are property owners in the bay near the Carlson Road dam, who can't launch their boats. "So if this dam is built to accommodate more flow, wouldn't it make sense to raise the sill to the point where" they can launch their boats if there is adequate rainfall?

Zietlow said that according to his measurements, Round Lake's water level has fluctuated 2 1/2 feet in the last 12 years.

Reinemann said people need to understand that with 27 miles of shoreline and a 10-foot opening at the lakes' outlet, "raising and lowering the sill is not the silver bullet" to impact the water level.

The committee voted to forward the task force's recommendations to the county board, the Round Lake Property Owners Association, the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribe, the DNR and the Osprey Lake Association for review. Ultimately, the recommendations will come back to the county board for action.

"This is the best possible solution. It should be win-win for everybody," Olson said.

"You're on the right track," said Dan Tyrolt of the LCO Conservation Department.

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