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Groups approve plan to raise Lake Koshkonong water

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JAKE MAGEE
Tuesday, August 30, 2016



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

With the Lake Koshkonong Wetland Association and Thiebeau Hunting Club's approval added with Rock-Koshkonong Lake District's, all major stakeholders have given the green light to a Department of Natural Resources' plan to raise Lake Koshkonong's summer water level.

With some reluctance, the two remaining groups have signed off on a state Department of Natural Resources proposal to raise Lake Koshkonong's summer water level.

With the Lake Koshkonong Wetland Association and Thiebeau Hunting Club's approval added to Rock-Koshkonong Lake District's, all major

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stakeholders have given the department's plan the green light, attorney Charles "Buck" Sweeney said.

The lake district **approved the plan** at its annual meeting last month. The association and hunting club did the same in the following weeks, Sweeney said.

Sweeney represents the association and hunting club, two groups that have opposed the lake district's decade-long legal battle to raise the water level to improve boating and economically boost the area. The association and hunting club believe raising the lake's level would harm surrounding wetlands and shorelines.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2013 the DNR must consider economic impacts before deciding Lake Koshkonong's summer water level. Instead of following the lake district's request to raise the lake 7.2 inches, the DNR tried to create a plan all parties could live with to avoid another 10 years of litigation, department officials have said.

The department's plan includes:

— Raising the summer water level 3 inches starting June 15, 2017. The summer water level will be in effect June 15 through Sept. 28 each year.

— The department examining wetlands for "dramatic injury" every two years for 10 years starting in 2017. If it finds none, the summer water level would be raised another 2 inches in 2019 for a total of 5 inches.

— The district developing a comprehensive plan to protect wetlands, including armoring wetlands and shorelines and possibly dredging parts of the lake.

— The district presenting a detailed plan for how it will operate and maintain the Indianford Dam.

DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp "just wanted to get the groups that were in litigation to sign off" on the proposal. With everyone on

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board, it's likely the department would implement its plan, Sweeney said.

The department declined to comment Tuesday, citing “ongoing negotiations.” No timetable for a decision has been set yet, a department spokeswoman said.

Any lake stakeholders—including the district, association, hunting club and even farmers concerned with losing property to higher water—can contribute to the district-sponsored comprehensive plan. The groups will agree on projects to help prevent shoreline erosion and damage to wetlands, Sweeney said.

“The key to this, in our view, is the lake management plan,” he said.

The department will have objective measures in place when examining wetlands for “dramatic injury.” If the rising lake level seriously damages wetlands, the department won't raise the water another 2 inches, department officials have said.

Sweeney fears raising the lake even 3 inches can have detrimental effects on his clients' properties, he said.

“We're hopeful that giving them 3 inches it won't destroy the wetlands,” Sweeney said.

His clients also worry the district won't properly operate the dam or adequately follow the lake management plan, he said.

“We will see what happens. If it doesn't work out, we will be back in litigation,” Sweeney said.



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