

Lake Koshkonong businesses want DNR to consider economics of raising water levels

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NEWVILLE—Chico Pope didn't realize the importance of water levels until Lake Koshkonong flooded in 2008.

The overflow was so severe the lake and many businesses around it shut down for weeks, putting a strain on the local economy.

“That's a similar effect low water has,” said Pope, who's owned the Buckhorn Supper Club on the lake for 18 years.

When the lake is low, tourists, campers and fishers go to other lakes to recreate, which hurts businesses and property values in the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District, he said.

Lake Koshkonong reaches a maximum depth of only about 7 feet. Just a few inches fluctuation can have a huge impact on the shoreline and boater access to on-the-lake businesses, such as the Buckhorn Supper Club.

But after a decade-long legal feud between the lake district and the state Department of Natural Resources over lake levels, it seems change could be on the horizon.

At the direction of the state Supreme Court, the DNR is accepting comments from Lake Koshkonong residences and businesses about the economic impact of keeping the lake at its current depth.

“As natural resources managers, we can predict water level impacts to wetlands, fisheries and shoreline vegetation, and we understand how water flows in the geographic area that feeds the Rock River and Lake Koshkonong,” said Stephen Ales, a water programs supervisor for the department.

“But we are less certain about the economic impacts of higher water levels on landowners and businesses. That is why we are asking folks to send us their comments and opinions,” Ales said.

The Rock-Koshkonong Lake District originally requested that the lake be raised just over 7 inches. The department decided in 2005 to leave the summer level where it was and eliminate the winter draw down.

The district challenged the decision, and the state Supreme Court ruled the DNR must consider the economic impact of low lake levels in its decision.

The DNR has reasons of its own for keeping the water level as low as it is.

A high water level impacts everything from fisheries to endangered species to wetlands.

“If you raise the water levels, the wetlands will have more water, and that could have a detrimental impact,” Ales said.

That's because certain water plants surface only with specific water levels and wetness. Increasing the water level might kill them.

The DNR won't announce its final decision until after the window for public comment closes. Residents have through Friday, March 13, to submit their thoughts, but that isn't a hard deadline.

"We put that date out there to encourage people to really think about the question we're asking them," Ales said.

The department, which already has received about 20 comments, will compile and categorize input and weigh options in the summer. Ales hopes to have a draft of their plan publicly available by fall.

Should the department be convinced, it would issue a new water order for the Indianford Dam, which controls the lake's water level, and the water level would rise 7 inches in the summer.

What the DNR chooses to do is the big question, Pope said.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Because of the lake's shallowness and gradual decline in depth, a water level increase of only a few inches could create a considerable change in the shoreline, the district said.

That would make it easier for boats to access docks.

It also would bring more business, said Pope, who employs about 25 people who depend on high water levels for business and income.

The piers near the Anchor Inn, which burned down last August, still allow access to The Naughty Mermaid bar on the shore.

The club features a pier on the water that boaters can use to access the restaurant.

"It's very difficult for those folks with these water levels to get to our business. The 7 inches we're asking for would allow people to get to our pier, to use our pier," Pope said.

Fewer people coming into the Buckhorn from off the water means less business overall.

Low water levels affect other businesses, too—from bars to gas stations to hardware stores, he said. If fewer people are using the lake, those businesses take a hit.

A water level increase would boost local property values. The higher the water level, the more people come to recreate at the lake and the more property values climb.

Property values that help fund local school districts and road repairs come from homes located on the water, Christianson said.

"It's not just the economic impact that it has here in the boundaries of the lake district," lake district Chairman Brian Christianson said. "It's one of the largest lakes in Wisconsin. It's a huge economic driver in Rock County."

Pope rents homes on the water to tenants who ask about the water level before committing to a contract. Considering there are hundreds of camping sites and lakes in the area, people go elsewhere when they know Koshkonong is low, he said.

"I think it (low water levels) will constantly limit our potential for more growth," Pope said. "I just think that this area can attract more people with more water."

Last year, the lake district hired UW-Whitewater economics professor Russ Kashian to conduct an economic report. An early draft presented at the district's annual meeting last year came to the conclusion that low water would result in the potential loss of pier use, shoreline appearance degradation, rock exposure, decreased property values and a less cohesive community.

The report was supposed to be presented to the DNR in the fall of 2014, but the lake district is finalizing a third addendum concerning the impact of low water on campgrounds, Christianson said.

The district hopes to present the report to the department with a few weeks, after the March 13 public comment deadline, Christianson said.

Christianson said he's frustrated with the DNR's decision to accept public comment. He believes it won't accomplish anything.

"All they really are accomplishing is a glorified political poll," Christianson said. "There is absolutely no precedence in what they are doing right now."

Christianson believes the department's opinion won't change unless they receive the economic report.

"The district has invested in research by ... professional biologists and hydrologists to purposefully keep attitudes and opinions out of what is the best outcome for Lake Koshkonong," he said. "We want to make sure that takes a much higher acceptance than public opinion."

Still, Christianson is encouraging others in the district to submit comments to the department. Christianson plans to submit comments of his own, both as the district chairman and as a private resident.

Even if public opinion tilts in the district's favor, Christianson said it shouldn't be prioritized over a facts-based economic report.

The importance of increasing the lake's water level goes beyond the lake district, Christianson said.

The district includes about 4,000 parcels of land, about 7,000 voters and about \$600 million of assessed property value, according to the state Department of Revenue, he said.

"That's the whole root of why an economic impact report is necessary," he said.

The DNR didn't fully consider those points when it originally made the decision in 2005 to keep the lake's depth as is.

But just because the DNR is re-examining the issue doesn't mean it has to change its mind.

"The complexity of this is all those different inputs into this decision," DNR public relations manager Bob Manwell said. "What may be a positive economic impact for one group might be a negative economic impact for another."

WHAT'S NEXT?

Christianson hopes that the DNR will comply with the lake district's request for higher water levels after the department reviews the economic report.

"The economics department at UW-Whitewater has been so thorough that I would be surprised if the DNR would reject any it," he said. "I have great hope that all this will be far behind us and we'll be spending our tax dollars on things that improve the lake for all user groups."

Christianson would like to see more cooperation between both organizations for future dredging and berming projects, such as those done at Stinkers Bay and Mud Lake.

The legal dispute so far has cost the lake district more than \$500,000 in tax dollars on legal fees, Christianson said.

The DNR has used several hundred hours of staff time through the years on the issue.

"Our job isn't to make the lake district happy," Ales said. "Our job is to follow the law as we see it."

Still, the DNR doesn't see the lake issue as adversarial, Manwell said.

"It's a balancing exercise. We need to look at all of these factors," he said. "That's our responsibility."