

DNR won't raise Lake Koshkonong summer water level

(Published Tuesday, April 19, 2005 10:46:44 AM CDT)

By Dan Hinkel
Gazette Staff

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources will not raise Lake Koshkonong's summer water level.

The state DNR rejected the Rock Koshkonong Lake District's April 2003 request to raise the level more than 7 inches in the summer to improve boating and recreation on the 10,400-acre lake.

The lake district will appeal the decision, which was released Friday, to a public contested case hearing, said Brian Christianson, Rock Koshkonong Lake District chairman.

The decision is the latest state ruling in a battle that has pitted proponents of higher water against DNR officials and local wetlands advocates.

The decision follows an environmental assessment released in December 2004 that offered a litany of potential damages that the DNR says raising the lake in summer could cause.

Raising water levels would spur erosion and loss of forested wetlands near the shoreline, drown some wetland plants and make the area less attractive to waterfowl, according to the DNR. And raising water levels would not significantly increase fish habitats or affect water clarity, the DNR says.

Christianson says scientists contracted by the lake district had done more thorough research than DNR officials.

Christianson is excited that the lake district will have a chance to bring scientists before an administrative law judge at a DNR contested case hearing.

"This is the very first time in six years that lake district scientists will have an opportunity to present all the data that's been collected," he said.

From the contested case hearing, appeals would go into state courts, said Ken Johnson, a DNR engineer who focuses on the lower Rock River.

While the DNR has faced sharp criticism from those who want lake levels raised, local wetlands advocacy groups have voiced their support for department decisions. Rick Persson, Lake Koshkonong Wetland Association chairman, was pleased with the DNR's decision not to raise summer levels.

"Everybody knows higher water levels in the summer are detrimental," he said.

Persson said he trusts the DNR's science and would like to see the battle over water levels end.

"I would hope that people would respect the DNR's decision, and we can all come together and start to put out something more productive," he said. "We need to learn to live with what we have."

The DNR came closest to embracing the lake district's request by agreeing to slightly raise the winter water level.

The DNR stopped short of cutting winter drawdowns on the lake altogether, as the district requested. But the DNR did change dam operating orders to make the lake's maximum winter level about 3 inches higher than in previous winters.

The lake district owns Indianford Dam, the dam 6 miles downstream that controls the lake's level. The district's contractor, power producer North American Hydro, operates the dam according to DNR orders.

The DNR changed the winter orders to maximize access to the lake without sacrificing the benefits of the winter drawdown, Johnson said.

"It's less than they requested, but it's more than we had in our original order," he said. "We felt that there's still some benefits to the winter drawdown."

Fully eliminating the winter drawdown would help ice fishing at the cost of open-water fishing, lessen the effect of carp barriers and increase ice damage, according to the DNR environmental assessment released in December.

Persson accepts the DNR's decision on winter water levels.

"I'm willing to try it," he said, adding that he hopes the DNR would reassess the decision if it proves damaging.

The DNR didn't get the winter drawdown decision right either, Christianson said.

"There's absolutely no environmental justification in a winter drawdown," he said.

The district will continue to try to end the winter drawdown, he added.

Close Window

[Close Window](#)