

Drawdown has Lake Koshkonong residents up in arms

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By Carrie Michael/The Janesville Gazette Staff

Frustrated residents around Lake Koshkonong are blaming a Department of Natural Resources policy for low water levels and damage to exposed shoreline this winter.

The DNR has lowered the water level in the 10,400-acre lake every winter since 1982. The purpose is to mimic the natural conditions that existed before the Indianford Dam was built at the southern tip of the lake, downstream as the Rock River flows, said Ken Johnson, DNR water leader for the Lower Rock River Basin.

Residents say this year's drawdown is more drastic than past years. Jim Folk, chairman of the Rock Koshkonong Lake District, says some residents have called him complaining of 300 to 400 feet of exposed shoreline in front of their homes.

Folk thinks the DNR let too much water flow through the dam this winter, or that the lake is low because of low rainfall.

The conflict has gone on for decades. Many residents want a stable water level on the shallow lake, which usually is 5 feet deep in the middle.

Johnson said this year's drawdown is more noticeable because of the dam itself.

This is the first year Rock County has had functioning wicket gates at the dam that allow water to pass through the dam and nearby powerhouse as intended, Johnson said. The goal is to lower the lake 18 inches during winter, according to DNR operating orders created in 1982 for the dam.

Part of the conflict lies in the lake's setup. Koshkonong exists because the dam backs up the Rock River at Indianford.

Johnson said the area was a wetland before the dam was built in the 1840s. In spring, it was a shallow lake as it is now. Then the water line would recede through the fall, and the river continued to flow through the wetland.

Now Koshkonong is a shallow lake year-round with some wetlands near its shores, and most residents want to keep it that way.

Folk, 61, grew up on the lake and describes the lake bed as a dinner plate, like a shallow depression. When water levels drop on a shallow lake, more shoreline is exposed than on deeper lakes.

Residents created the Rock Koshkonong Lake District in 1999. Like other lake districts in the state, it has the authority to tax property owners with special assessments and spend that money on lake projects.

"That's the whole intention of the formation of the district was to safeguard the dam's existence," said Brian Christianson, a town of Fulton supervisor and a district resident.

The district will take ownership of the dam once Rock County completes repairs on the structure. The district taxes about 4,500 parcel owners a flat rate of \$30 each, raising about \$135,000 a year, Folk said.

Johnson said the DNR handles winter drawdowns on other lakes with dams, including Monona, Mendota and Kegonsa in Dane County.

"We still need to make sure it's the right thing to do on Lake Koshkonong," said Johnson, who added that the way to do that is through scientific research and data collection.

The DNR draws down Koshkonong to prevent erosion from ice along the sensitive shoreline, Johnson said.

Sheets of ice shift like continents. They push against each other and the shoreline on all lakes, but the effects are magnified on expansive lakes such as Koshkonong.

The ice would push against and erode Koshkonong's shoreline, said Mike Halsted, DNR water management specialist. Drawing down the water gets the ice line away from the shore.

Drawdowns also create benefits for wetlands, Halsted said.

The drop in water consolidates the sediments along the shore. In spring, that compacted sediment is ready for plants such as cattails to take root. Such plants couldn't take root in sediment that remained a soupy consistency, Halsted explained.

Residents have their own theories, all of which tout the benefits of higher water levels. Folk said that when the water recedes, it allows brush and woodland plants to creep into the wetlands and take over the area.

Johnson said the DNR is conducting a study at Lake Koshkonong to monitor the wetlands and determine whether they are expanding or contracting at eight sites around the lake. The study started last year and could last three to five years.

Christianson claims the drawdown is causing more damage to the shoreline and to exposed parts of the lake bed.

This year, vehicles are parking on the exposed lake bed at the Vinnie Ha Ha boat launch in Koshkonong Township, said Aaron Johnson, 39, who has lived on Vinnie Ha Ha Road seven years.

"They're tearing up the lake bottom. It's not a normal thing," Aaron Johnson said. "Several trucks have been stuck down there and have had to have been winched out of there as recently as last month.

"Just from a habitat standpoint, that can't be a good thing."

Normally people parked vehicles in that same area, but in past years that area was covered with ice, he said.

"What they're doing with this winter drawdown is just bad from the habitat right down to the local economy," Aaron Johnson said. "It's hurting tourism. It's hurting the habitat in the lake. It's hurting every property owner on the lake that wants to utilize the lake right now."

Christianson believes the lake bed that gets exposed in the drawdown becomes a ruined habitat. The drawdown kills aquatic vegetation and aquatic creatures, such as mussels, Christianson and Folk said.

But DNR observations show the drawdown doesn't kill enough creatures or vegetation to significantly impact species populations, the DNR's Johnson said.

Christianson said the drawdown creates more shoreline erosion when the lake thaws.

"We saw chunks of the wetland marsh areas floating in the middle of the lake, then eventually down the river," Christianson said about last year. "You can actually see the mud flats that get chewed off and cut off from existing wetland areas. They're almost like floating bogs.

"These floating bogs will kind of roam aimlessly around the lake."

The unmarked, submerged chunks of vegetation and roots pose hazards for boaters, Christianson said.

Halsted said high water causes the erosion, which would be worse if the lake had no drawdown. The last 10 years have had minimal drawdowns because the dam wasn't working.

"We're experiencing severe shoreline loss around the lake," Halsted said. "We're losing literally feet per year, in some cases, 2 or 3 feet a year that's gone."

Johnson of the DNR said recreational users of a lake often want high water levels, while those interested in preserving wetlands want lower water levels. The hope is to find a middle ground, he said.

Residents want the drawdowns to end and contacted state lawmakers. In response, Rep. David Ward, R-Fort Atkinson, and Sen. Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, wrote Jan. 8 to DNR Secretary Scott Hassett to request that the DNR cease them.

Johnson of the DNR said problems that residents see on Koshkonong also result from pollution that flows downstream from urban areas north of the lake, as well as agricultural runoff and carp.

He said the DNR would need scientific evidence to prove the drawdown is causing negative effects on the lake before he would recommend a policy change.