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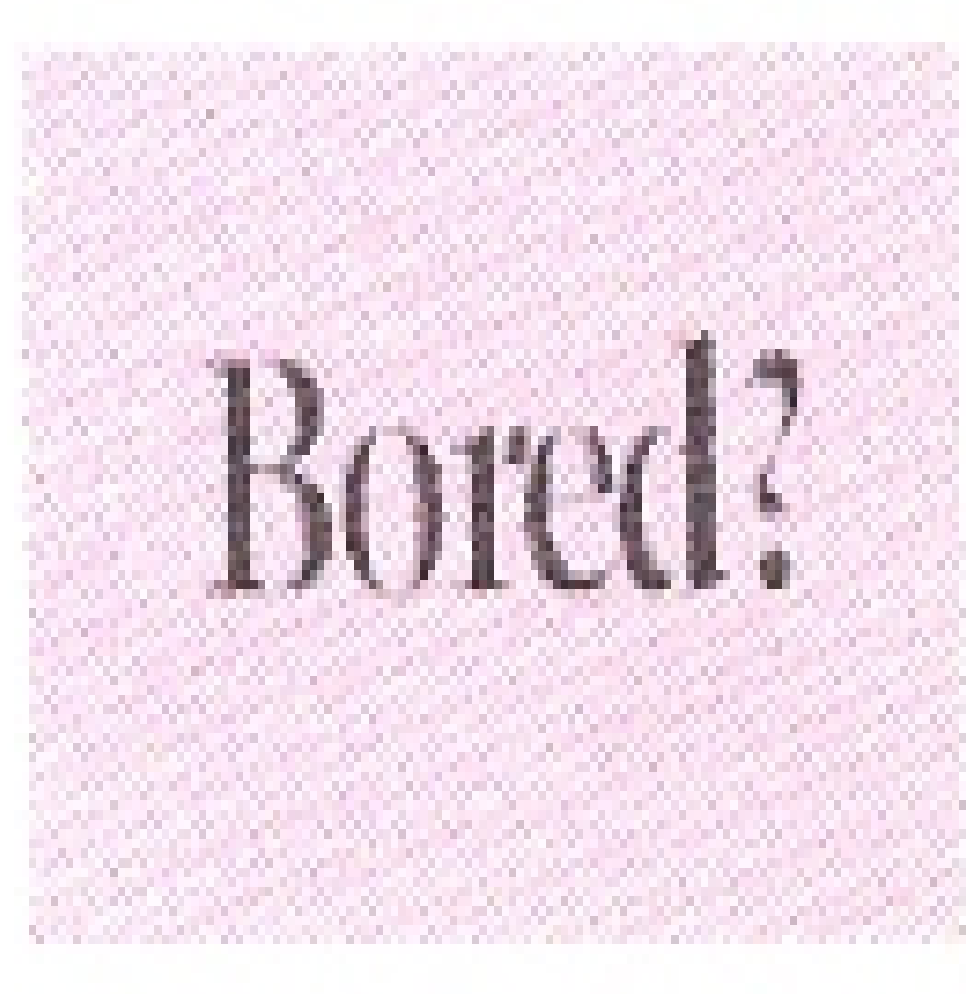
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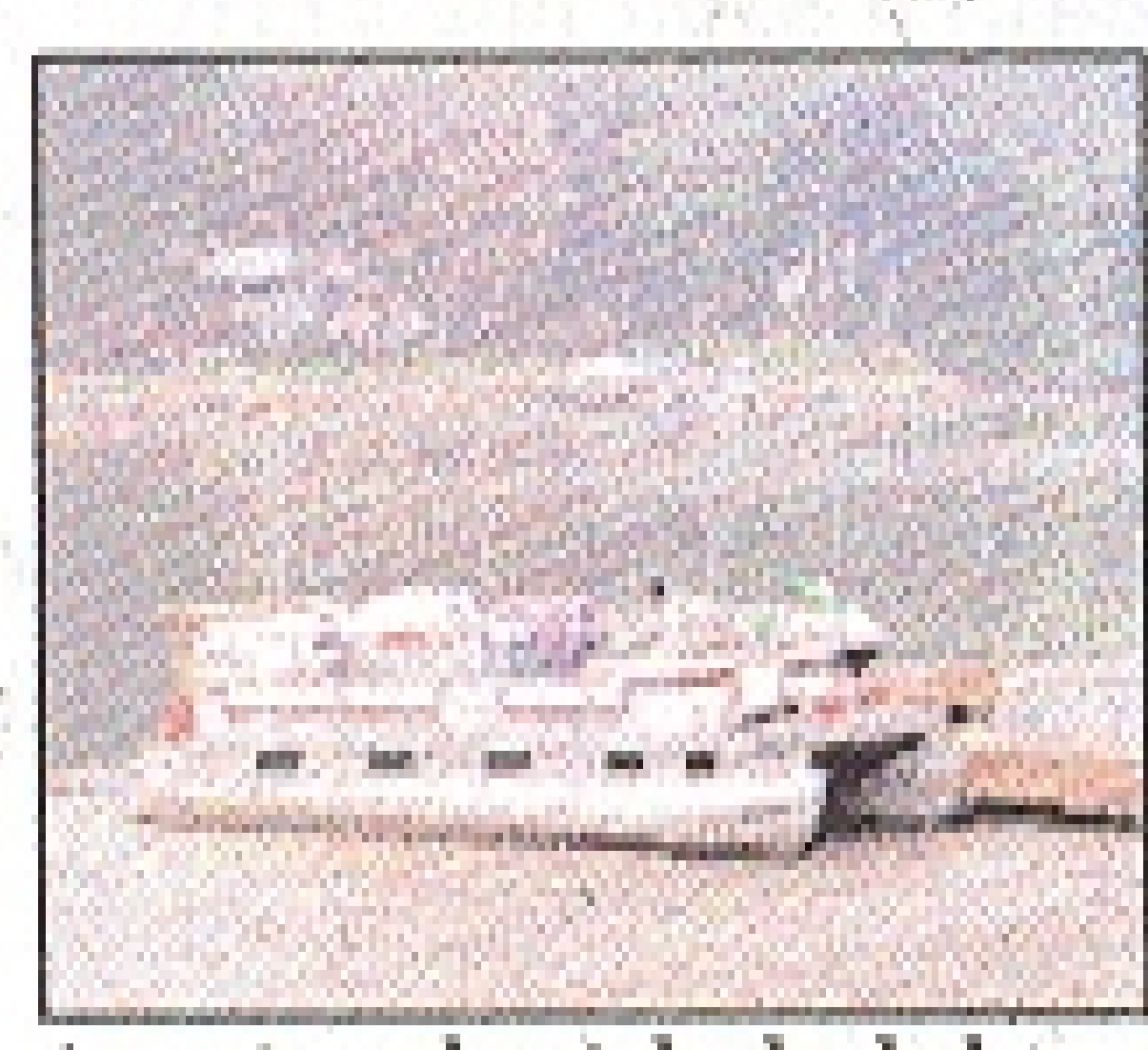
Error makes Rock River water levels plunge between Indianford, Centerway dams

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By Carrie Michael and Frank Schultz/Gazette Staff



A mistake by the operators of a hydroelectric generating station in Janesville caused a big drop in the Rock River between Janesville and Lake Koshkonong.



A pontoon boat docked along North River Road outside of Janesville sits on mud left behind after the Rock River receded.
Bill Olmsted/Gazette Staff

Piers arch over murky mud and boats rest on the river bottom as the Rock River in Janesville hit a low this weekend and stays stagnant this morning.

The culprit might be a closed dam north of Janesville at Indianford, with open gates downstream at the Centerway Dam here in Janesville.

Tom Kautz, Rock County parks director, said the Department of Natural Resources ordered the county to close the Indianford Dam gates Friday. The county closed the gates between 3:30 and 4 p.m. Friday.

The reason for the order was low water on Lake Koshkonong, Kautz said.

The Indianford Dam creates the lake, which is upstream from Janesville.

Also, the lake was getting a low inflow of water from the Rock River at its upstream side near Fort Atkinson.

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"If that all diminishes, we have to close. So we did what we were required to do," Kautz said.

Here in Janesville, North American Hydro operates the Centerway Dam and generates electricity from it.

Kautz said North American Hydro was notified via fax Friday morning that the Indianford gates would be closed.

"They're supposed to respond to their river levels, their upstream water levels," Kautz said.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission gives operating orders to North American Hydro because the Centerway Dam generates electricity.

Once a dam generates electricity, it answers to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, not the DNR, Kautz said.

"They answer to FERC which supercedes not sure why this comes up on spellcheck, CM the DNR," Kautz said. "Indianford Dam is a non-federal hydro dam."

Scott Kalabunde of North American Hydro in Neshkoro said this morning he had not heard of a problem with the Rock River level but would check with his local operator of the Centerway Dam generating station.

Kalabunde did not call back in time for The Janesville Gazette's deadline this morning.

Kalabunde said his company receives daily reports from Rock County about the status of the Indianford dam upstream.

In Janesville, city staff planned to decide whether to close boat launches. The launch at Traxler Park had grating poking through the water this morning. The bay next to the launch was a muddy exposed river bottom.

"My suspicion is that they will be closed," Mike Williams, city director of leisure services, said this morning about the launches.

Williams said the fact that Indianford closed its gates wasn't the major problem.

"It's the relationship between what they do at

here in Janesville. Those two dams of course are not operated by the city, so we have no control," Williams said.

"It's just a simple inflow and outflow thing," Williams said. "If Indianford closes their gates and restricts the flow into that reservoir, and if (North) American Hydro doesn't do the same, you've got no water coming in and water going out the other end.

"It's just a matter of hours before you're going to dry the river up."

Weather has been hot and dry this summer.

The summer has delivered 15 days when the temperature reached or topped 90, and rain has been sporadic and spotty. While Janesville's official weather station at the municipal wastewater treatment plant recorded almost 3 inches of rain July 22-23, other parts of the city and Rock County received no or little rain.

Riverfront landowners are torqued over the drastic weekend drop.

"It's hard to operate a pontoon boat when it's on mud," said Bob Gordon, who owns land on the river about a quarter mile north of Highway 14.

Gordon said the river has dropped 4 to 5 feet in the past three days.

"I don't know what's happening, but I do know that the props won't go through mud," Gordon said.

"I like to be a landowner, but I don't like to acquire land in the way it's being acquired," Gordon said.

"I'm thinking of calling Wisconsin Dells and getting a duck, because then I could go through land or water," he said, referring to the amphibious vehicles that transport tourists at the Dells.

The Rock Aqua Jays water ski team canceled their show Sunday at Traxler Park in Janesville.

Their main show dock is completely exposed and resting on sand. Their center stage is 10 yards away from the water line. Previously skiers could hit the beach and immediately step up a short

Standing on the shoreline, one looks down on their 5½-foot high jump ramp, anchored in the middle of the river.

The team is scheduled to host the National Show Ski championships at the park August 10 to 12.

The event is expected to draw 30,000 people into Janesville and generate \$3.5 million in tourism revenue.

Jim Post, show director for the team, said this morning that the immediate problem is the estimated \$1,000 in lost revenue from donations the team typically collects at halftime of their shows from spectators.

As far the timing with being run aground at this point in the season, Post said, "It's not good."

They're focusing on getting some answers right now, and trying not to worry about whether Nationals will be a problem, he said.

Team members told him it seemed like the water was getting low Thursday and Friday, yet the team was still able to ski.

"From Saturday to Sunday it looked like it dropped another foot," Post said.

Janesville resident Joe LaChance, who lives on North River Road north of town, said he noticed low water levels Thursday.

His 70-foot long dock was resting on sand and his pontoon boat was in a few inches of water.

"All of a sudden boom, the water was gone and nobody knows why," LaChance said. "Overnight it disappeared.

"I'll bet you it dropped 18 inches overnight, then it just kept creeping out, out, out."

Now his 70 foot pier sprawls over sand. He estimates the river is 300 feet wide at his home.

He said in the 10 years he's lived there, water levels change sporadically and residents get few answers.

Williams said, "We're going to take whatever action we can to reach a reasonable water level,

not only for the aqua jets, but people that live along the Rock River and use it for recreation.

"We're very interested in what's going on. We'll try to coordinate efforts between the dam owners it make the problem go away and hopefully prevent it from happening in the future."

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