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CEWF discusses the complexities of the Trent-Severn Waterway

By Liz Danielsen

When it came to water levels, this spring and summer was an extremely interesting experience for everyone along the Trent-Severn Waterway, but especially for the people trying to manage a very complex system and for those on reservoir and flow through lakes throughout the system.

That's according to Coalition for Equitable Water Flow co-chair Chris Riddle, who addressed representatives from member lake associations at the CEWF's general meeting of members on September 18th at the Haliburton Fish Hatchery.

The meeting was co-hosted by Riddle and Ted Spence, a CEWF member from Mississagua Lake, the single largest reservoir lake in the system. Spence introduced the members of the CEWF advisory committee present and noted, with just a hint of envy, that the coalition's co-chair Martin Rist was 'off somewhere exploring the Fjords of Norway.'

Getting into the meat of the meeting, Riddle said, "When I met with TSW in the spring, the message was *pray for rain*. Realizing that we had some of the lowest spring water levels ever, the TSW introduced some of the most severe conservation measures throughout the system, conserving as much as water as possible and literally shutting off our damns. By early June the flow through lakes were at such extreme lows, TSW attempted to explain to the public what had happened."

According to the TSW's Dave Ness , despite forecasts by Environment Canada of an unusually hot and dry summer, the area was subjected to the fifth largest deviation in precipitation in the last 40 years with heavy rain filling some of the reservoir lakes to the point of raising concerns about erosion by early July.

"All of this demonstrated the complexity of the system and the need to try to work on a management scheme that is more responsive to the reservoir lakes," said Riddle.

Riddle reported that Dawn Bronson, the new TSW Unit Field Superintendent had told him that she had received what equalled 10 years of knowledge during her first year, given the extremes that were experienced.

Riddle, who is an islander on Kennisis Lake spoke of his love of the lake, but said that the dam there allows the TSW to drop the lake level by as much as 9 feet if they choose; one example of the extent of fluctuations that can be experienced.

Riddle talked about the advisory committee's review of the recommendations that came out of the panel report "It's all About the Water' and the things that had been acted on, ignored or modified. He spoke of the value of the Water Management Advisory Council established by the TSW, comprised of a group of stakeholders with a variety of different needs. (Both Riddle and Haliburton's Keith Hodgson have been appointed to the advisory council.)

Riddle also spoke of the willingness of the TSW to hold open and frank discussions with CEWF.

Riddle spoke of the importance of the work of their founding chair Bonnie Fleischaker, but said that while her focus had been highly political the time had come to shift their emphasis to working with the staff of a variety of government departments.

He also mentioned the much anticipated memorandum of understanding between Parks Canada and Ontario, as represented by the province's Ministry of Natural Resources and said that the federal government had expected it to be complete within six months from the time that the panel report was released, but to MNR's credit they had raised a number of issues about the level of detailed required. "Some of the issues are very complex."

Another piece of important news that Riddle offered was the fact that at the beginning of September a joint statement by the CEWF and the Voices for the Trent-Severn Waterway had been issued. Although these two groups have been at odds in the past, together the Voices and the Coalition endorsed several statements contained in the panel report and agreed to taking an integrated approach to water management throughout the watershed in order to address key priorities for both the watershed and TSW system. These included flood management, adequate water flows to sustain water quality, water conservation throughout the watershed, safe navigation and access to waterfront property and sufficient sustained funding to restore, upgrade and maintain TSW infrastructure.

The two organizations also agreed on the need to educate and inform their respective members and key stakeholders about the merits of the TSW system and to provide advice to Parks Canada through the Water Management Advisory Council.

“Working together on advancing issues of mutual interest will be very important to us all,” Riddle said.

Riddle also said that the CEWF advisory committee continued to respond to issues raised by their members, some general in nature and other specific concerns. He said that the committee was become increasingly aware of the issues of the flow through lakes and just how vulnerable lakes like Maple Lake are.

Riddle then talked about the CEWF’s current focus which included promoting an integrated approach to water management by the TSW at the watershed level, raising awareness of the impact of fluctuating water levels and flow rates and promoting specific enhancements to water management on the reservoir and flow through lakes.

Riddle quoted a statement from Conservation Ontario which said, “Ontario’s water resources are at particular risk from climate change. Rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns have already reduced river flows, warmed surface waters and dried out wetlands. Integrated Watershed Management allows us to address multiple issues and enables us to plan within a very complex and uncertain environment.”

In seeking changes to the water management models presently used by the TSW, Riddle said the CEWF had been observing and trying to document fluctuating water levels and flow rates and look at a number of impacts from extreme high levels causing flooding, erosion, ice damage, wetlands swamped and loon nests destroyed to extreme low levels where fish habitats are degraded, restricted access, wetlands dry out and boating becomes unsafe. Both high and low levels and flows create unique navigational issues and inability to navigate between lakes.

“We are proposing that TSW review the extent and timing of the draw downs and be prepared to make allowances for lake specific navigation and access issues. We are looking at a system set up 100 years ago to manage a canal. There are a lot of new people in the area and new impacts and concerns and we have to start to review and shift our priorities.”

He suggested that there were many potential solutions to the concerns of fluctuating water levels and flow rates on individual reservoir and flow-through lakes. For example, on Kennisis Lake it might be simpler to dredge the channel between little and big Kennisis lakes rather than require the lake level to be held high. “We are looking for our members to identify some lake specific issues and in order to do that we need community engagement and for each lake association to feed their thoughts into the overall lake management regime.”

To address this new concept Riddle said that each association should try to identify (realistic) preferred water level ranges primarily during the navigation season from mid May to mid September. According to Riddle, unless specific information is identified on individual lakes, we can expect equal percentage draw downs to remain the basic approach taken by TSW.

“In wet years, we think the draw down should be designed to take only the water needed for the TSW to meet their mandate. In dry years we think it should be designed to incorporate appropriate conservation measures throughout the entire watershed.

Riddle suggested that much of this information could be provided to TSW to be incorporated into a study of the system presently underway.

Moving on to discussions about fish, Riddle said that the coalition members such as the Kennisis Lake Cottage Owners Association had been working with Davis Flowers (MNR) on a spawning bed survey and a fish survey to identify species. He noted that Kennisis is reported to have 12 or 13 species many of which few people have ever seen, emphasizing the need for updated information.. Riddle agreed to provide the members with some guidelines to assist in information gathering and the timing of when the information was required.

Don Benson commented that that as the fish would be spawning within the next two or three weeks it was critical that the draw downs be done before spawning or the area would stand to lose a large percentage of the spawning.

TSW's Water Control Engineer Dave Ness was on hand to respond to questions from the members including a number of questions on the best approach to identifying preferred levels. A number of concerns were raised from members of individual lakes where problems had been encountered due to extreme high and low levels. (As an example, on Maple Lake loon populations have been endangered due to the devastating low levels encountered and several lodges were unable to rent their facilities; then suddenly docks were found floating down the lake given sudden high levels.)

Ness talked extensively about the challenges of maintaining a balance throughout the system while trying to deal with forecasts and actual rainfalls. Ness also reviewed the stimulus funding invested in TSW infrastructure but had little good news to impart on improved levels of funding in the future, despite the panel's recommendation that 10 times more funding needed to be channelled into the system for ongoing maintenance and upgrade requirements.

When the general discussion and question period was finished, Riddle and the members of the advisory committee were thanked for the incredible amount of volunteer time that they invested in the coalitions work.

For more information on the CEFW, their recent news letter and details of the joint statement issued by CEWF and the Voices for the Trent Severn Waterway, check out www.cewf.ca