

Panel on water levels puts Parks Canada on hot seat

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It all just fell short of satisfaction for the members of the Coalition for Equitable Water Flow (CEWF).

There were more than two dozen representatives from close to 30 lake associations at the CEWF annual general meeting, which featured a question and answer with representatives from Parks Canada responsible for the complicated management of the Trent Severn Waterway (TSW).

Hosted at the Haliburton Highlands Outdoor Association fish hatchery in Haliburton on Saturday, Sept. 17, Roger Stanley, director of canal operations and Ryan Hamersma, the Haliburton area superintendent responded directly to the concerns and questions related to the water level fluctuations this past year of the TSW, including this autumn when it left boats high and dry.

Stanley said Parks Canada uses a "redline" to achieve a goal to have the canal at 50 per cent full by Oct. 1. They begin drawing the water from the reservoir in late June. Each day 1/2 a per cent is drawn.

Stanley said the significant water level fluctuation was attributed to the reduction of 55 per cent of precipitation compared to the usual average for the month. This was still within the "historic average."

Stanley, who is new to the director position, but has more than 27 years of water management experience, added the management of the TSW includes a large network of lakes that precludes him from giving detailed information for every area along it.

CEWF co-chairperson Martin Rist said the meeting did provide a public update of the details behind waterway's management, but left him frustrated since the answers did little to resolve concerns. He believes Parks Canada is mainly focused on fulfilling the mandate of the canal water level to meet standards set out from a study conducted decades ago related to the TSW. This kind of management fails to see the larger picture accountin for weather changes, user volume and added pressures such as energy production.

Started in 2006, the coalition is comprised of representatives from the Haliburton and the four systems of lakes south. They envision an integrated management style at the watershed level that will be ecosystem based and considers all the stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Rist adds for the past two years there was progress towards a concerted effort in the management for all the lakes rather than adhering to the mandate of the canal that relies on a report that is several decades old.

Despite the criticism, he commends this current management for announcing the commission of a dam report that enlisted engineers to study the TSW.

The best thing, Rist said, is that it reveals safety issues requiring funds to improve the TSW. Thus avoiding the catastrophic bridge and tunnel damage that have occurred in Montreal, he said.

Although he believes Parks Canada staff work hard, nothing will progress until the mandate is changed at the political level since they are unable to break from the current management model.

Rist believes the lake associations in the area must band together more than ever in an "ongoing battle to make it work."

The CEWF has also expressed dissatisfaction with the out-of-date website information (for some lakes as much as a month) concerning the TSW. Stanley acknowledged the website problem and said Parks Canada is in the process of hiring a control technician who will be responsible for such a task, which was neglected due to a lack of staff. The candidate is supposed to be hired before this Christmas.

With the hiring expected soon, he said, they would look to other government organizations for examples to follow such as the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Rist said the importance of such information to the public should have never become a problem in the first place.

Ted Spence of the CEWF said to not forget the forecasts that were provided, as they were indispensable resource the past three years.

"They gave us the bottom limit of the worse that would happen to our water levels in the next two weeks (and they changed every week). We knew if it rained it wouldn't go down that much, but we knew if it didn't rain that was probably the worst more or less that would happen. It helped us a lot. We'd sure like to go back to that," he said.

A suggestion that water level information be provided to upload to the CEWF website was met with opposition since the federal government policy would not permit such action, Rogers said.

The entire four-plus-hour meeting was conducted in an orderly way with few members showing their frustration except for Bob Dubois of Jack Lake, who stood, waving his hand, agitated when his request to be notified about how many and when the stop logs were going to be put in or not was denied. Hamersma said he is not able to disclose such information. This was not the first communication Dubois has had with Hamersma.

Hamersma said the stop logs at the dams of Jack Lake, Drag Lake, Red Pine Lake and Nunikani Lake will be replaced to reduce the leakage and are expected this autumn.

Local MP Barry Devolin was scheduled to appear but was unable to attend due to the flu, Rist said.

Chris Riddle, CEWF co-chairperson, said the money the government spends is expected to be reduced annually for the next five years unless it is viewed as an essential part of the nation's infrastructure.

In closing, Rist stressed the diminishing infrastructure of the Trent Severn Waterway will mean greater costs in the future if it is not handled with the importance it deserves.

He likened it to a vehicle's maintenance: without regular maintenance, the car will break down.

Unlike what people might think, there has been change. It includes the pressure on water from greater use recreationally to power generation, including climatic effects is putting greater emphasis on this battle, Rist said.

"Our politicians do need to be reminded ... this is a real issue. It's going to catch up with us," he said.