

Where's All the Water Gone?

Concerns Rising Over Low Water Levels

“My beach looks like the Bay of Fundy at low tide.” (Gull Lake Cottager)

“The beach on Gull Lake is an excellent barometer of the water levels in Halliburton and at the moment it looks like the Bay of Fundy at low tide.” That’s according to one long standing Gull Lake cottager who isn’t alone in having mounting concerns about water levels throughout the reservoir lakes. Across the county people are extremely concerned about what they consider to be record low levels and recently some climatologists have become harbingers of bad news.

“We encourage people to educate themselves.” (CEWF Co-chair Martin Rist)

Further to the Voice’s editorial on the impacts of an early spring in last week’s issue, the Voice contacted Martin Rist and Dr. Chris Riddle, who co-chair the Coalition for Equitable Water Flow.

The CEWF’s website recently posted an article called ‘Where’s the water...?’ In the article, the CEWF refer to inquiries from various members who have been observing their lake levels carefully and noted that water levels throughout the Trent-Severn Waterway reservoir lakes are at the lower end of

historical ranges. Given this observation, the CEWF asked Dave Ness, a Water Control Engineer from TSW for his assessment of the situation and what his plans were to address it.

On March 22nd, Ness advised that TSW staff had been undertaking dam operations with the intent to capture the melt water being generated by the local watershed. Their focus appeared to be on the reservoir lakes that had no other lakes flowing into them, as they are typically more difficult to fill because the TSW doesn’t have the ability to divert water to them. They said they would also focus on large volume lakes given their requirement for more water to fill them.

“Typically, lakes like Horseshoe Lake do not have a hard time filling because 80 percent of the Gull River watershed is upstream of Minden. On Friday (the 19th) the dams at Horseshoe and Twelve Mile were completely closed off, likely frustrating the residents of Minden with dry riverbed conditions.”

At the time Ness advised that there were only a few dams spilling water within the reservoir system; Gull Lake, Moore Lake, Carving Lake and Eels Lake which were scheduled to be addressed either that day or the next.

Acknowledging that both short term and long term forecasting remains an imperfect science, Ness reminded everyone that there are still two months of spring remaining for the lakes to fill and that it only takes one event to exceed monthly precipitation averages.

Their bottom line? The TSW is not overly concerned about filling at this point, but said they were taking the necessary precautions to get the lakes filled.

During an interview early this week, Riddle said, “A lot has changed over the last week since the logs went in.” Riddle noted that several lakes that are hard to access (Red Pine for one) are still dropping which was an indication that no one from TSW had been in to put in the logs.

In an interview with Carwest News Service early in March, David Phillips a senior level climatologist with Environment Canada spoke of this past winter as the driest winter of a 63 year record, saying ‘it’s beyond shocking.’ Phillips noted that in his 40 years of weather watching he hadn’t seen anything like it and warned that ‘the winter that wasn’t might have set the stage for potentially horrific water shortages, insect infestations and wildfires this summer.’

Phillips also suggested that this past winter could be a dress rehearsal of what could become normal in years to come.

Riddle himself was not all doom and gloom but he was cautious. He said, “Many of the lakes between extreme high and low are on a trajectory that looks positive. The TSW has certainly moved to put the logs in and bring levels up, but here we are at the beginning of April with almost no snow left in the bush which is highly unusual. We can’t count on the snow melting and the runoff filling the lakes, so once again, we’re falling back and we’ll really be relying on rain rather than snow melt to reach full levels by the end of May.”

Riddle also said that it doesn’t take more than one or two big rain events to make a huge difference, but also referred to forecasts of a dry spring which makes it a bit harder for the trajectory of the lakes filling up to continue on historic lines. “When I look at Kemmis Lake, I can see that within the next month the lake needs to come up by about a metre, where in the past it only has to come

up about three quarters of that amount at best.

Rist commented that spring events have been unusual this year and that long term forecasts from meteorologists indicate an extended dry season throughout the summer. “This raises a real concern about how we get through the summer, unlike last year when there was plenty of water to go around.”

According to Rist that will be a forward going concern for Parks Canada to focus on as well as concentrating on more water conservation.

As a further caution, Riddle said, “Not only is the spring forecast to be a slightly dryer season than usual, it is also expected to be slightly warmer than usual.”

Riddle referred to the ‘water budget’ paper that is posted on their website which talks about the amount of rain that actually gets into the lakes and rivers. “Huge amounts evaporate by the time water gets to the Kawarthas. These are compounding affects that will make it even harder for the TSW to maintain levels in the summer unless we have unexpected rain events.”

Riddle said, “It’s not so much that we think there is a problem in particular with what TSW personnel are doing this year compared to others. We think there has been a problem all along with the model they are using. The panel report and other documents all encourage them to adopt a new model that includes conservation and recognizes that there are more priorities than just maintaining navigation on the canal section of the TSW.”

Both Riddle and Rist said they were encouraged that the TSW had let a contract to develop a new model. Rist said that an abstract from that has been posted on their website. He also noted that a brief historical summary of the TSW is also posted on the site that moves into current issues and recommendations that conclude that TSW should be shifting some of their focus to conservation.

According to Rist, when looking at recent history and the language of the RSP for the new study, TSW is clearly paying attention to the reservoir lakes as well as conservation. “For them that is new. There appear to be changes in the right direction, so it’s onwards and upwards.”

“In anticipating an ever increasing demand they need to be more vigilant in conserving water levels, going through the current model and updating it to reflect the multiple requirements of the different stakeholder groups.”

When asked what the timing of the contract was, Riddle confirmed that the project was being funded by federal stimulus money which suggests that the contract should be complete and a new model developed by March 31st, 2011.

Riddle said, “Part of our hope and expectation is that while the mandate of the TSW hasn’t changed specifically as yet, they are clearly aware of a number of recommendations all pointing in the same direction in terms of what needs to be done.”

According to Riddle and Rist, the TSW will be appointing a new Field Unit Superintendent effective April 15th. The new appointee, Dawn Bronson, originally from the Port Perry area, has had a 25 year career with Parks Canada, most recently with the Manitoba Field Unit, and it is Riddle and Rist’s hope that both she and the TSW will reflect recommendations made to them in the way that they approach management.

Getting back to the concerns being raised throughout the reservoir lakes, Riddle again said, “A lot can change in a week.”

He urged readers to check the CEWF website (www.cewf.ca) which provides updated water levels.

Rist said, “We encourage people to educate themselves about the system and try to monitor their lake levels through that link as it helps considerably. Memories can be short and some people are newly arrived so we also encourage people to check the site for background articles and news updates that will help build awareness and support to try and change the system.”

Finally, Rist said that experts are anticipating greater and wider swings in climate change in the future with a broad trend towards warming. “And that is what we’re seeing, so we can’t take anything for granted. Things are changing. Hopefully, through attention and support we can prepare for it and the consequences won’t be quite so dramatic.”

Meanwhile, when residents feel like indulging in a brief moment of cutting loose, it probably wouldn’t hurt to do a little rain dance along the shorelines of your lake or one nearby. ■

“A lot has changed in the last week.” (CEWF Co-chair Chris Riddle)



At this time of year, these fixed docks/rafts along the Gull River in Minden are often 18-24 inches underwater.