

Lake Winnebago 2009 Fall Water Level Strategy Conference Call Minutes

Introduction: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps)(USACE), Detroit District held the Lake Winnebago fall water level strategy conference call on September 1, 2009. Mr. John Allis, Chief of the Watershed Hydrology Branch for the Detroit District USACE, opened the call at approximately 9:00am (C.D.T.), with a roll-call of the attendees. Approximately 17 agencies/users and interested parties participated.

Presentation of Agenda: Mr. Allis began the meeting by presenting the conference call agenda. This included a discussion on the basin's current and expected fall conditions, fall water level strategy, and an open discussion.

Overview of Summer Conditions and Significant Events: Mr. Allis began by stating before refill this year the basin had plenty of water during the Spring. The USACE achieved the navigation season target of 3.0 ft a few days ahead of schedule on May 29. During the month of June, the region had decent water and the USACE was able to hold the target of 3.0 ft. for the entire month. He reported that the outflows along the Lower Fox River for the month of June were on the low side and averaged between 4,000 and 7,000 cfs. By June 24, all gates at Menasha and Neenah were closed and, outside of a couple days in July, have remained closed since. Mr. Allis revealed that July was dry and the lake level had a steady drop from a high of 2.98 ft. to 2.71 ft which is about 3-1/2" below target. The month of August received some rain events which caused the level to rise to where it is today at 2.8 ft. With all gates closed during August, the outflows along the Lower Fox River were held to between 1,200 and 1,500 cfs.

Weather Conditions: Mr. Keith Kompoltowicz, District meteorologist, reported that we are having a dry summer. In fact, the recorded precipitation for the month of July was 2" below average. The month of August picked up some rain events with a few recording rainfall amounts > 1" (August 26 & 28) and > 2" (August 8). He indicated that there are drought conditions in the northern portion of the Lake Winnebago basin and the areas surrounding Lake Winnebago are abnormally dry. July posted the coolest month on record for the mid-west. He mentioned that dry conditions will prevail for the holiday weekend with clouds & sun and temperatures in the 70's with no precipitation expected. He concluded with stating that there is a chance fall/early winter temperatures will be above normal.

Proposed Strategy: Mr. Allis began the discussion on the proposed fall water level strategy by explaining some constraints on the overall process. He stated the USACE current plan of action would be to gradually decrease the level of Lake Winnebago before ice forms on the lake which usually occurs in early December. The lower levels would reduce the potential for ice shoves associated with higher lake levels as well as satisfying environmental concerns for the hibernating habits of the furbearers living around the lake. Our current plan of action will be to hold the lake level steady for most of September and gradually draw the level down to about 2.5 ft by October 15. Ideally, our plan would have the lake near 2.7 ft. by mid-September and continue to draw down to 2.5 ft. by Oct 15. This would be about 3-1/2" lower than today's level. He also reported that this level is roughly 2.5" below the level historically observed on Oct 15th over the past 20 years. In general, Mr. Allis reiterated that we should see a little drop in lake

level over the next couple of months. Our plan is to have the lake level in a slow/steady decline and be near 2.20 ft. by December 1st. It was noted that historically, over the past 20 years, the lake level was drawn down to 2.4 ft by Dec 1st. Of course, the drawdown will be dependent on the temperatures and ice conditions during this period.

Mr. Allis continued and stated after a stable ice cover of several inches forms on the lake, we will commence lowering the lake level to 2.0 ft. by December 31. Also, Mr. Allis informed the river users that they may see the outflows increase by 700 to 1,000 cfs over the last few weeks of September, as the USACE makes any necessary gate changes to meet the drawdown target. He reiterated that this is highly dependent on the rainfall during this period and that no drastic drawdown measures are expected for the fall drawdown. Mr. Allis said that Lake Winnebago water temperature data are now posted on our website. The website address is: www.lre.usace.army.mil/glhh/winnebago. Finally, Mr. Allis added that copies of the “updated” Lake Winnebago Facts Booklet would be available at the October 27, 2009 Regulation meeting.

Open Discussion: Numerous property owners and agency representatives voiced their concerns on the proposed fall water level strategy. Their various comments and the USACE responses are as follows:

1. Mr. Bill Hitchcock had a minor concern for drawing the lake level down starting on October 1st. He stated that many boaters would not have sufficient water to remove their boats at the boat ramps around the Oshkosh and Fond Du Lac areas. He requested extending the start of the drawdown to October 15th. He suggested posting a news release explaining the USACE fall drawdown activities. Mr. Hitchcock also inquired about the status of the Lake Winnebago Fox-Wolf River Basin “Facts Book”. Mr. Allis indicated that the booklet is in final review and copies would be available at the October 27, 2009 Regulation meeting.
2. Mr. Mike Pedersen of Kaukauna Utilities stated that gradual, controlled releases in lieu of excessive gates opening are better for his operations as well as for the boaters along the Lower Fox River. Mr. Mike O’Bryan commented that if there is a lack of rain during these operations, there would not be any problems with the outflows along the river. Should significant rain events occur, the USACE would keep the releases controlled as possible.
3. Mr. Dan Rudebeck of the Lake Poygan Sportsman’s Club stated that hunters and fishers use the upriver lakes in the fall. If levels are dropped too low this would impact their access. He also said that pan fish hide in the shallow bays during the fall and early winter. If the levels are lowered, the pan fish would be flushed out into the deeper waters and be unprotected from predators. Mr. Rudebeck suggested that start of drawdown be extended to October 15.
4. Mr. Art Techlow of the WDNR suggested that changing the commencement of the drawdown to October 15th would be acceptable. The 0.3 ft drop in level is a subtle change over a 45-Day period. In addition, drawing the lake down another 0.3’ between October 15 and December 1st would have minimal impacts on the fish and wildlife in the area. He stated once 6”-8” of ice forms on the lake, the winter drawdown could commence. He believes that compromising to a drawdown starting on October 15th would be a fair compromise. The only caveat he instilled was not to have the lake rise above today’s level of 2.8 ft.

5. Mr. Jack Couillard, a property owner on the north shore of Lake Winnebago asked what the lake level was when ice shoves occurred last Spring. Mr. Allis stated he believed the level was about 1.8 ft. Around that time, ice shoves were reported at various locations along the Lake Winnebago shoreline but did not cause any significant damage to the shoreline or adjacent structures. Mr. Couillard suggested drawing the lake level down even further, to the elevation of the existing off-shore sand bars. He believed that this would protect his property from the ice shoves.

6. Mr. Mike Suha, from the City of Appleton inquired about algae blooms on Lake Winnebago this year. Mr. Art Techlow of the WDNR responded by stating we experienced a quiet summer. We had a cool summer with temperatures 10 degrees cooler and a fair amount of windy days that kept the algae bloom development down. Lake Winnebago as well as Lake Butte Des Morts did have some algae bloom development, but did not have any negative impacts on summer activities.

After a review of the fall strategy objectives, Mr. Allis ended the conference call and thanked participants for their feedback. Participants were encouraged to visit the Corps' website for much information on water levels, flows, and meeting notices. The website address is: www.lre.usace.army.mil/glhh/winnebago.