



PROTECT CONSERVE ENHANCE

State-Owned Dams



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As I'm writing this, we just received news of the budget address by Governor Rendell and his inclusion of funds for repairing the state-owned dams that have been identified as unsafe. This is important to us because the Fish & Boat Commission manages 17 of these unsafe dams on behalf of the Commonwealth. This bold and positive move will address a serious issue both in terms of safety but also in providing important recreational opportunities for many people throughout Pennsylvania. So what does this mean? Let me walk you through this issue by providing a little background, a definition, and an approach to how the funds will be used, and by telling you how you can help.



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First, most of you probably did not know that the Fish & Boat Commission is responsible for managing more than 60 lakes ranging from relatively large waterways such as Tamarack Lake (556 acres) in Crawford County to little Stump Pond, a 12-acre lake in Susquehanna County. Many of these lakes provide the only opportunity for water-based recreation in the area. In some locations the lakes are so popular and ingrained in the local community that we have developed long-term partnerships with local governments to manage the area and develop parks, campgrounds, and other features to enhance recreational opportunities.

A good example of this is Mauch Chunk Lake in Carbon County. This 330-acre lake is essentially in the county-run Mauch Chunk Lake Park that provides camping, picnicking, boat rentals, swimming, and much more. Other lakes like this include Leaser Lake in Lehigh County and Kaercher Creek Lake in Berks County. These types of partnerships are a great deal for the Fish & Boat Commission, the county, and the public.

As with all good stories, though, there is a flip side, and this has to do with the history of several of these dams as well as the aging infrastructure that doesn't meet modern design standards and safety regulations. Many of these dams were built decades ago when standards for dam construction were less stringent than they are now. Furthermore, the Fish & Boat Commission accepted ownership of some dams that were poorly built right from the start. For example, Hereford Manor Lakes (Upper and Lower) in Beaver County were constructed as a by-product of a strip-mining operation. The material used to build the dam itself was not the appropriate mix of fill and may contain a wide variety of trash such as tree trunks and other material that degrades over time and leads to leakage.

Fortunately, situations like Hereford Manor are rare. The major issue that needs to be addressed with many of these dams is the requirement to meet the safety standards to ensure that their spillways have the capacity to pass a probable maximum flood (PMF) flow of water. Pennsylvania has an unfortunate history of dams breaking in flood conditions (Johnstown in 1889) and we don't want that to happen again. In response, the Department of Environmental Protection assesses all dams and looks at important issues such as spillway capacity, the worst-case scenario for flood events (Hurricane Agnes or more), and what would happen downstream if a break occurred. Are there houses



Photo-Art, Michaels

The dam at Donegal Lake, Westmoreland County, has also been identified for high-priority repairs.

and businesses downstream or just a stream and trees or field? A dam that cannot pass 50 percent of a PMF event is labeled “unsafe.” Unfortunately for the Fish & Boat Commission, we have 17 dams that fall into this category and we need to address these repairs or be faced with the appropriate order to breach the dams.

So what will this cost? If we totaled the estimated repair costs for all 17 dams, we reach an astounding total of over \$80 million. This is obviously an amount that is impossible for the Fish & Boat Commission to bear. To put this in context, our annual total operating budget is only about \$50 million. The Governor’s proposal, which includes around \$33 million for Commission dam repair, is the first real effort in the history of the Fish & Boat Commission to address this serious challenge.

How will we make this work? First, there is a successful model after which we can shape the effort. Leaser Lake, the 117-acre Lehigh County impoundment, was dropped 21 feet and reduced to a 40-acre puddle after leakage was found in the dam. Through an incredibly powerful partnership of Lehigh County, the local community, the Governor’s office, and the Fish & Boat Commission, a \$5.2 million funding package was developed to rebuild the dam and eventually get the lake back to its original status.



Photo-Bureau of Engineering and Development

Dutch Fork Lake dam, Washington County, damaged in Hurricane Ivan in 2004, is one of the dams listed to be repaired so that it meets today’s safety standards.

The message here is that we will be seeking strong local partnerships that can identify funds to match the new dollars in an effort to repair these aging dams.

The second part of this package will have to include a serious look at prioritization. Which facilities provide the most important recreational opportunities for the area? Are there alternatives nearby? How much use does the lake get, and can we justify the expense? All of these factors will have to be weighed in the calculation of where to invest

the limited dollars. Will everyone be happy? Obviously not, but the result of rebuilding a significant number of these Commonwealth treasures is far more attractive than the alternative of seeing most of them breached and lost for generations to come.

There is no doubt that this is an opportunity that we don’t want to squander, and we are appreciative of the effort to fix these recreational jewels.

The final question is, What can you do to help? As with each state budget there is a political process that must take place. Each of you can and should be involved in that process by informing your state legislators of the importance of these lakes. For more information on this effort, please visit the Commission’s web site, www.fish.state.pa.us.

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