We all know the drill. Get home from work on a summer day, eat supper and hit the yard. The lawn needs to be mowed, the walks need to be edged, the garden has to be weeded. Keeping up your property, to maintain its value and usability, is never-ending.

The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission is a property owner, too. It owns, leases or has easements on some 33,500 acres of land and water. That includes more than 60 publicly accessible lakes and surrounding grounds across the state, about 250 fishing and boating access sites, office buildings and fish hatcheries, a Harrisburg headquarters and a training facility. These properties and facilities need to be maintained, from simply mowing the grass to repairing roofs. The Commission is also involved in construction, from adding an extra room on a regional office to rebuilding a dam spillway.

The Commission’s Construction Section is headquartered at Bellefonte, with Robert K. Fishburn as Chief. Don’t thank him and his crews for constructing the new Commission Harrisburg headquarters—that huge undertaking was tackled by an outside contractor and many more workers. But do thank Fishburn and his skilled crews for a lot of what else makes your fishing and boating possible.
“We build many of our own facilities,” Fishburn says modestly. Then he ticks off a quick list. At the hatcheries that includes waste treatment; installing underground electric, standby generators, pumps and controls; building new raceways; and whatever else needs to be constructed around the Commission, other than the mega-projects. Fishburn says he has four construction units, based in Centre County, and two earth-moving crews, one carpenter crew and a mechanical/electrical unit. That’s about 20 employees total, for work that never ends and which, in fact, has a backlog. The type of work they do “goes in phases,” says Fishburn.

In the last several years, the Construction Section has been doing a lot of dam repairs. Cloe Lake, a Commission-owned lake in Jefferson County, is one of the bigger projects the Commission Construction Section has taken on recently. The dam, which was built in 1910, was showing seepage and a void through the spillway. “Nothing is forever, not even concrete,” says Fishburn. “We have a lot of dams in Pennsylvania, and through the years, a lot of money is needed to keep them in repair.” Since the long-ago days when these lakes were constructed, specifications for safety have changed, and their impounding structures have deteriorated.

The Cloe Lake project should be complete by the end of this year. It is requiring a lot of earthmoving, and steel and concrete placement. The effort is done in partnership with the Jefferson County Conservation District, which received a state “Growing Greener” grant of $750,000 to cover some of the work’s cost.

“We are rebuilding the spillway at Cloe,” says Fishburn, “putting in a totally new emergency spillway.” The old one was severely deteriorated and not large enough to take a large flood, so we’re building the new one “state of the art,” he says, designed by Commission engineers. The new spillway will be a “labyrinth” construction. Instead of a straight concrete weir that the water will flow over, the labyrinth spillway will be like a series of “V’s.” More volume of water will fit into less space as it travels over the V-shaped spillway, explains Fishburn.

Another big project for the Construction Section, says Fishburn, was Commission-owned Fords Lake, in Lackawanna County. The embankment there leaked, so the crew had to take the structure out completely, reconstructing drains and the dam breast. The Commission has at least 10 additional dams that need attention to meet current standards.

“We also build boating accesses,” says Fishburn. A lot more than construction takes place in creating a boating access. “The Commission’s Real Estate Section is involved in purchasing the land, the Engineering Section does the design, we do construction, and the Maintenance Section does the maintenance,” he explains. The Construction Section also built and/or renovated many of the Commission’s law enforcement and fish culture station buildings.

At the Commission’s Bellefonte Fish Culture Station, we are updating and modernizing the electrical system. A major renovation was done at the Southcentral Region Law Enforcement Office, remodeling a former firehouse building. The Northwest Region Office had a room added for more office space, and a new heating system was installed. At the new Harrisburg photos-Linda and Bob Steiner Commission construction crews work on a new spillway at Cloe Lake, Jefferson County. Photos show equipment operators during demolition of the old structure and excavation for the replacement.
headquarters, the Construction Section built the desk units for the main conference room. The renovations and cabin units at the H.R. Stackhouse Training School, Bellefonte, were built in the late 1970s by our crews, says Fishburn.

At the Liverpool Access on the Susquehanna River in Perry County, the crews recently constructed a new concrete launch ramp, a large lot for boat trailers and cars, and an entrance road on the wooded site. They also built the access at Stillwater Lake, in Susquehanna County. The Commission has a lease agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which owns the dam and lake.

At Tamarack Lake, Crawford County, problems with the tower structures at the dams brought the Construction Section into action there. The lake has towers at both ends and drains two ways. Fishburn says they did additions to the towers, rebuilt the gates, constructed temporary roads onto the lakebed to facilitate fish salvage, and built a handicapped-access fishing pier. The pier should make the lake a popular fishing spot after its reopening, since the pier juts into deep water, away from the shallow shoreline.

One unusual job of the Construction Section is moving sand at the Commission’s North East Marina, on Lake Erie, spring and fall. Natural wave action moves sand from west to east along the lakeshore, and the marina interferes with the littoral drift. The sand-moving effort moves the sand around that blockage. “We pick up the sand on the west side of the marina and move it and distribute it on the east side,” says Fishburn. “We move 20,000 cubic yards per year, 10,000 in the spring and 10,000 in the fall.” This work requires a track-mounted excavator, bulldozers, big loaders and dump trucks. The Construction Section has its own heavy construction equipment and tractor-trailers to transport everything all across the state, says Fishburn.

“We are also assisted by our Survey Section that does its part in completing these projects, our Equipment Maintenance Section that keeps us in motion, purchasing, secretarial and administrative staff, and dedicated people who work every day and go the extra mile to serve the anglers and boaters of Pennsylvania. I know for me, my hat goes off to them,” Fishburn says.
Property Maintenance Section

Building anything is a continuing story—construction may be complete, but you can’t just walk away. Maintenance is a constant. In the Commission, that job falls to the Property Maintenance Section. Dave Wolfe is the Fishing and Boating Facilities Manager. Although Wolfe is headquartered at Bellefonte, his crews are spread throughout the state, in five maintenance areas. In the northwest, Maintenance Area 1 is at Tionesta, with a satellite at Walnut Creek. In the southwest, Maintenance Area 2 is headquartered at Somerset. Maintenance Area 3, covering the northeast, is at Sweet Valley, with a satellite at Pleasant Mount. Maintenance Area 4, responsible for the southeast, is at Speedwell Forge Lake (Jonestown). The central part of the state is Maintenance Area 5, headquartered at Pleasant Gap.

Sounds like a lot, but the section has only 21 fulltime employees, plus summer help.

Mowing grass is an important part of the Maintenance Section’s warm-weather duties, something every suburban householder can understand. On accesses and public-use areas, the mowing certainly helps keep the areas open and pleasant. On dam breasts, cutting grass is for more than just “looks.”

The grass mowing is required by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, says Wolfe. Safety is the reason. “Earthen dams are prone to seeping through the dam breast,” says Wolfe. “We used to have crown vetch (vinelike, pink-flowered vegetation) on the dams. Crown vetch is thick cover, and inspectors couldn’t visually see any leaks or damp areas. When we mow the dam breast, these areas are more visible.” A seeping dam can be checked and repaired, if needed, keeping persons and property downstream protected.

The Maintenance Section also works on drawing down dams, repairing towers and fixing concrete (“as long as it’s not a major job”) on spillways, catch basins and outlet piping. On boating access areas, Maintenance is responsible for maintaining the entrance road, whether that means crack-sealing asphalt pavement or grading dirt and gravel. Deteriorated concrete launch ramps are repaired by Maintenance, and many lake accesses are plowed of snow in the winter, to allow parking for ice anglers.

At some Commission accesses, volunteers perform small-scale maintenance. “In our Adopt-an-Access program, persons or a group of people can adopt an access and perform litter pickup and/or mowing,” says Wolfe. The Adopt-an-Access program is “overall working very well,” he says. Routine maintenance of accesses in far-flung areas, where transporting the crew and machinery would be cost- and time-prohibitive, is contracted out.

“We also take care of minor building maintenance,” says Wolfe, “if the plumbing backs up, the closet doors won’t close and the heating system won’t heat.” It’s one of Wolfe’s crews that those who work in Commission buildings call.
They mow the lawns there, too.

Like anyone with a yard and household responsibilities, much of the work varies with the seasons. During the winter, says Wolfe, a lot of time is spent servicing equipment. “We have utility trucks, snow plows, dump trucks, backhoes, mowers and rubber-tired loaders, and we take care of most of the maintenance on all of them.” In the spring, the boating accesses need to be opened. Like doing your own after-winter yard work, the Commission maintenance crews repair weather-caused damage and perform general clean-up. High water in spring can deposit windrows of debris on launch ramps, which have to be cleared and trucked away. “Trout-fishing access areas and lakes get priority,” says Wolfe, “because that season opens before bass fishing. Then we clean up and open other areas.”

“We were fortunate last year we didn’t have a lot of flood damage,” remembers Wolfe. “In 1996, we hauled dump-truck load after dump-truck load out. Seven feet of debris covered the Sunbury Access—tires, tree limbs, everything.”

In summer, the crews mow and get to the minor projects they missed when they were opening the access areas in the spring, like replacing launch-ramp planks. Late summer and into fall, Maintenance does major projects, like pouring launch ramps or access road repairs. “We also build our own floating docks, as boat accesses for lakes and rivers,” says Wolfe. And they fabricate the concrete tie-ups, if nothing is available at the site, plus walkways. “We found we can buy the parts and lumber and build them more cost-efficiently ourselves,” he says. The floating docks and walkways can be removed before winter, so they don’t sustain ice and flood damage. They’re placed out again in spring.

From the Walnut Creek Access, on Lake Erie in western Erie County, to the Frankford Arsenal Access on the Delaware River in Philadelphia, the Commission’s Maintenance Section has work to do. On the lower Delaware the tides influence when and how Maintenance can work on refurbishing docks. “We set them in at mid-tide or before or after low tide, so we have time to work on them,” says Wolfe. “You have to be there on the day the tide is going to be right. We don’t work well underwater.”

Some of the cost of maintenance comes from the Federal Aid in Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration Act. “We are reimbursed for part of our funding for labor and partially for some equipment,” says Wolfe. Funding otherwise has come from Commission budgets. Right now, deferred maintenance on access areas and improvements amounts to an $11 million need. Dam safety repairs and improvement needs total $31.5 million, and hatchery improvement and effluent treatment needs are more than $25 million. The Commission is currently exploring funding sources to pay for the much-needed build-it, fix-it, keep-it-operating work through its “Water Resource Infrastructure Initiative.”

Construction includes carpentry. The Commission Construction Section built an addition to the Commission’s Northwest Region Law Enforcement Office last year.