

## Advocate Newspaper Article 7/11/15

BUCKEYE LAKE – For several months, business owners and residents in the Buckeye Lake region have lamented not having been given adequate warning of the decision to lower water levels for an unknown period of time.

With sufficient notice, they say, inventory orders might have been adjusted and accommodations made by boat and homeowners who were instead left high and dry by a lowered lake.

In an effort to determine the factors and the timing resulting in the March announcement the lake would be held to winter pool levels, The Advocate requested all correspondence between the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and the U.S Army Corps of Engineers since January 2014. The materials were requested June 10; a portion were released to The Advocate on July 1. The Advocate has so far only received records of correspondence conducted between January 2014 and March 2015.

While not all requested materials have been released to The Advocate, those that have give some sense of the course of events that brought about a summer with little boat traffic, pontoon boats resting in the beds of dry canals and waist-high vegetation now flourishing in many of those canals around the lake.

### **19 months ago: Dam 'first priority'**

In a letter to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Ohio Department of Engineers director James Zehringer named the evaluation of Buckeye Lake Dam as the department's "first priority." That letter was dated more than 18 months ago.

Based on records of correspondence between the ODNR and the Corps obtained by The Advocate from the ODNR, Zehringer wrote the letter requesting the Corps be a part of the Buckeye Lake Dam Project on Jan. 24, 2014.

"Our first priority is a current assessment of conditions at Buckeye Lake Dam, as well as the evaluation and recommendations regarding emergency preparedness, repair, operation, and maintenance and owner/operator responsibilities for the dam," Zehringer wrote.

"ODNR cannot reasonably and expeditiously procure these services through our ordinary business practices," the letter stated as one of the several reasons why the Corps was being asked to take on the project. The letter also made note of the Corps' extensive experience with public dams.

According to the records obtained, the final agreement for the Corps to provide an assessment of Buckeye Lake Dam was signed April 18, 2014. The agreement noted that the Corps would not begin the assessment

before receiving the estimated cost of the project: \$140,000.

The project officially began July 18, 2014, with an estimated termination date of Jan. 15, 2015.

### **Merchants: Delays hurt businesses**

It is estimated by the ODNR that there are usually 50,000 visitors to Buckeye Lake on the Fourth of July, and about 461,000 visitors annually, according to the correspondence. Based on recent accounts from area business owners, those numbers will likely not be reached this summer. As businesses struggle to stay afloat — many since shifting hours or cutting back on staff — some business owners say that a warning would have helped them plan better.

Tim Figgins, owner of Boat Boys and Boat Boys Marina, said that depending on the marina, they may not stock boats until January or February to be sold in the summer. Boat orders can be canceled, too, if given enough warning.

According to the correspondence, the ODNR received a draft of the Corps report Jan. 12, 2015, and a final version of the report was available for view Feb. 9. The results of the Corps report were not released publicly until March 11.

"Major damage was caused in that two months they held on to that information," Figgins said last week.

Josh Fisher said Fisher's Marina has had to adjust ordering practices for next summer because 10 brand new 2015 boats are still sitting in the showroom. Without selling those, Fisher will be hesitant to order too many new ones for next season, he said.

"We're normally required to place orders as early as July for the next year," Fisher said, adding that orders could always be canceled later.

The challenge for next year, he said, is maintaining relationships with dealers if the marina will be ordering fewer boats. Fisher said he did not attend as many boat shows as he normally does this spring and summer.

Tim Ryan, president of the Buckeye Lake Region Chamber of Commerce, said that warning would have done businesses a lot of good. He said he believes the ODNR probably knew what was going on last fall.

"If they had told us back in November it would have made a big difference," Ryan said.

Ryan said restaurants and bars could have put their staff on notice early so that they knew the upcoming summer might be slower. As for businesses, he said, "I think they would have ordered less merchandise or nothing at all."

### **Outreach undertaken last fall**

The ODNR did host three outreach meetings last fall for Buckeye Lake stakeholders while the assessment of the dam was being completed. They were hosted Oct. 28 and 29 and Nov. 19 in both Millersport and Hebron.

According to media releases from the ODNR, the meetings were intended to answer any questions about the ongoing assessment on Buckeye Lake Dam.

"They were pretty open," said Kitty Zwissler, a Buckeye Lake City Councilman who attended one of the outreach meetings. "I thought they were relatively transparent."

Zwissler said the meetings were well-attended and representatives from both the ODNR and the Corps were there to answer questions about the ongoing report.

While the meetings were hosted in October, Zwissler said that because so many people who have homes on Buckeye Lake are only there seasonally, any warning about lowering lake levels for the following summer should have come in September. That way, those who store boats by hanging them above the water could have removed them from the lake while the pool was still high.

Since the report's release in March, the lake levels have been lowered and for the most part kept at the winter pool elevation — 888.75 feet above sea level.

The ODNR has not announced the engineering firm that will be taking on the Buckeye Lake Dam project, although applications for the project were due by April 10.

"They tried to do the right thing," Zwissler said. "While they were trying to be transparent, I think they were slow at getting the information out."

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## Study and report timeline

Jan. 24, 2014

April 18, 2014

June 18, 2014

Aug. 25-28, 2014

Oct. 28 - 29, 2014

Oct. 29, 2014

Nov. 14, 2014

ODNR receives draft of Corps report

Nov. 19, 2014

Nov. 24, 2014

Jan. 12, 2015

Feb. 9, 2015

March 11, 2015

April 2, 2015

Final Open House meeting hosted for stakeholders

ODNR purchases home next to Seller's Point Spillway for \$7

ODNR receives draft report from Corps

ODNR is notified that final report is ready to view

Results of Corps report released to public

Gates at Seller's Point and Amil gate spillways opened to be

Source: Correspondence between the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and the U.S Army meetings