CRWD Regular Board Meeting Summary:

Karl Leslie and Glenn Baird from Cedar Lake Conservation Club attended the Clearwater River Watershed District Meeting September 17, 2025 along with Al Wolf from the Swartout Lake Association (presently under the process of formation). Staff gave a presentation on the current and historical water quality in Cedar and Swartout Lakes as well as projects completed and O&M status.

The Board, staff and residents discussed goals for lake water quality in both lakes and heard loud and clear the desire to further improve water quality for both lakes. At issue is the recent decline in water quality in Swartout Lake as the result of the Cormorant population being an order of magnitude higher than it was when we began the 2007 Project- and the subsequent impact on Cedar Lake downstream. While we measured tremendous improvement in water quality in Swartout Lake directly following the initial work for the 2007 project, the increased clarity in the lake may have drawn in more cormorants.

The estimated phosphorus load to Swartout Lake from the cormorants alone is 754 lbs./ year.  The goal load for Swartout is 264 lbs./ year- so the cormorants alone are delivering 286% of what Swartout can handle and meet its standard. Swartout Lake cannot reach its nutrient and water quality goal without managing the load from the cormorants. However, despite multiple strategies discussed and attempted, the DNR has thwarted efforts at population reduction- the birds are a federally protected species.

At the meeting, an idea staff presented to the managers earlier this year to manage the cormorant loading was revisited based on some new information. Staff had proposed a floating silt curtain around the island in the summer coupled with a localized alum treatment for the water within the curtain. This would provide a barrier to the bird dropping rich water and the rest of the lake, and then bind to the phosphorus inside the silt fence and settle it out to the lake bottom - keeping it from moving downstream to Cedar.

Regulatorily, and cost-wise, this was a non-starter.  However, with some input from landowner Wolf on Swartout, and a newly updated air photo just now available from the county shows the extent of nesting clearly visible (for the first time). Based on that, we are investigating adding a terrestrial stilt fence between the nesting areas and the lake coupled with an updated application strategy for population management.

Further, we discussed:

* lake level management on Swartout for Cedar water quality (severe landowner flooding on Swartout this year prompted a review of the outlet elevation which was found to be too high relative to the DNR requirement- 1 baffle was removed which did release additional- ONE TIME- amount water to Cedar and that was just before this recent bloom.
* Retrofitting or upsizing existing projects. The Board directed staff to present a scope of work for that at the October meeting. If approved that work can begin asap and likely be finished by December.
* Beaver activity in the upper watershed has taken projects off line but seems to be under control now with a long-term plan to manage them (beaver populations are high across the state and watershed).
* The results of the carp study on Swartout and next steps for that (carp are also a major contributor to poor water quality in shallow lakes).
* In the original 2007 project, Alum Dosing to Cedar Lake was recommended. This would be upstream of Segner pond.

For the existing water quality - we have the challenge in Cedar of the in-lake mixing. When we get large precipitation events in the watershed upstream of Swartout during the time when Cedar is stratified, we will always see an algal bloom like this. An alum treatment or full restoration of Swartout are the only two things that will improve this.

Our goal for Cedar was that the 10-year average water quality would be 20 ug/L TP.  As you can see, we are a little above that with recent data- Tp in 2025 was about double the concentration we generally see.

If you’d like me to attend one of your meetings or jump on a call, please let me know. I'm happy to do so.

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