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We're *All* About It

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OUR ENVIRONMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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Bernie McGurl

Lackawanna River Conservation Association senior project manager



A SEDIMENT IMPEDIMENT

River advocates, enthusiasts wonder if reservoir dam project that severely muddied waterways could have been prevented

BY JIM LOCKWOOD
STAFF WRITER

Upon first seeing muddy waterways in Lackawanna County, some river advocates and enthusiasts had the same jaw-dropping reaction and question: how could this have happened. Fisherman Rob Petrunich of Taylor, who fishes daily “down the line” in the Susquehanna River was on his way there on Feb. 3 as usual. While driving over a bridge in Old Forge, he saw that the Lackawanna River was brown and sludgy. Something was seriously amiss, Petrunich instinctively knew, and let out an exclamation.

“It looked like wet cement going down the river,” Petrunich said. Over a week later, “The Lackawanna River still looks like chocolate milk. It’s terrible.”

A Pennsylvania American Water project to upgrade the No. 7 Reservoir in Dunmore, which dates to 1872, and its dam released large quantities of silt and sedi-

ment into Roaring Brook and the Lackawanna River, muddying their waters for miles, authorities have said.

The release of sediment occurred as the water company was working on a \$17 million rehabilitation project of the

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SEAN McKEAG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Above: A dam is being worked on at the No. 7 Reservoir in Dunmore on Monday. At top is an aerial view of the work.



WATER: Advocates wonder if situation could be handled better

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100-million-gallon reservoir to upgrade the dam structure for stability and to continue to meet state regulations under the Department of Environmental Protection, water company spokeswoman Susan Turcmanovich said last week.

The project, which began in October and was targeted for completion in the fall, involves installation of new post-tensioned anchors in the dam, additional concrete buttresses for stability, a new concrete spillway crest and selective demolition of the existing structure. The opening of two large-diameter valves to lower the reservoir level for dam work and

recent heavy rain caused silt to flow through the valves, Turcmanovich had said.

"I think it was a huge miscalculation on the part of the water company and commonwealth (DEP) because they didn't have any fail-safes," Lackawanna River Conservation Association Senior Project Manager Bernie McGurl said. "I would have thought the company would have known the reservoir held a tremendous amount of silt. You're talking huge volumes of sediment (released). That was a mistake, obviously, because they wouldn't have wanted to do this."

McGurl believes the issue began Feb. 2. The muddy water has since continued to flow as the water company

works to try to contain it.

The reservoir dammed Roaring Brook as it flows through Dunmore and Scranton. The discoloration from the silty sediment is starkly obvious where Roaring Brook flows into the clear Lackawanna River in South Scranton, and turns the river brown at that point. The Lackawanna flows into the Susquehanna River above Pittston in Luzerne County.

McGurl said the two valves in the No. 7 Reservoir dam that are at issue include a 36-inch diameter valve and 48-inch diameter valve, both cast iron. In recent months, the lowering of the reservoir reduced the body of water to essentially a 30-acre mud hole, but with Roaring Brook still continuing to flow through the silty bed. The 36-inch-diameter valve had been opened at some point under the project to lower the water level. The project involved digging down to bedrock at the dam, to continue the work of stabilizing and reinforcing it. At some point, the 48-inch diameter valve also was opened.

"When they finally got it open, they could not close it and that's when they lost control of it," McGurl said.

He fears that ecological damage from the sediment will significantly impair the two waterways and their aquatic wildlife of macroinvertebrates and fish, possibly for years.

The water company did not respond to followup questions Monday from The Times-Tribune.

The DEP learned of the situation of muddied water on Feb. 4, DEP spokeswoman Colleen Connolly said last week. On Monday, The Times-Tribune asked Connolly various follow-up questions, including whether PAW notified the DEP of the situation, and if so, when.

Connolly said the DEP continues to investigate the matter and would be better able to answer questions when the investigation has been completed.

Other agencies learned of the situation through members of the public and media reports.

Marel King, the Chesapeake Bay Commission's

Pennsylvania director, said that organization became aware of the situation last week from a concerned citizen. The commission is an advisory body and relies on the DEP to address the situation as necessary.

"We will continue to monitor it. We certainly appreciate folks bringing it to our attention," King said.

The Susquehanna River Basin Commission also is following the news and information surrounding the situation, SRBC spokeswoman Stacey Hanrahan said.

"The proper agencies are working to ensure no further impacts," Hanrahan said. "A post-event stream assessment will hopefully be able to provide some insight about impacts and over what timeframe the stream will recover."

"One should not lose sight of the importance of maintaining dams like this," Hanrahan continued. "The consequences of a dam such as No. 7 Reservoir failing would be much more severe and damaging to the downstream habitat than this type of release. These types of dams help to ensure


drinking water security for communities throughout the Scranton region.

McGurl said a focus going forward will be to ensure this type of event does not happen again elsewhere with such projects to upgrade old dams and reservoirs, and to develop mitigation procedures and practices in how to isolate and control sediment pollution.

Mark Zander of Moosic, who lives near where Spring Brook flows into the Lackawanna River and is an enthusiast of both waterways, said that when he read in a Times-Tribune article published Saturday comments from McGurl that it could take years for the waterways to heal, "I was heartbroken."

"They knew or they had to have known this would happen," Zander said. "Granted the damage is done, but it wouldn't hurt to have the public more aware from this water company. We pay good dollars for it."

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