

# The Times-Tribune

We're *All* About It

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2024

\$2.00 NEWSSTAND

## Officials: Probe project that polluted region waterways



CHERMAK



GAUGHAN



McGLOIN

### Dam rehabilitation work led to release of sediment, silt

BY JIM LOCKWOOD  
STAFF WRITER

SCRANTON — The Lackawanna County commissioners want a criminal investigation into Pennsylvania American Water's

rehabilitation project of the No. 7 Reservoir dam in Dunmore that released large quantities of silt and sediment that has polluted Roaring Brook and the Lackawanna River.

In a statement released Thursday, Commissioners Bill Gaughan, Matt McGloin and Chris Chermak called on Lackawanna County District Attorney Mark Powell to open a criminal investigation

into the "environmental disaster" to the waterways, as well as a "potential public health threat to thousands of residents."

The project to upgrade the No. 7 Reservoir, which dates

to 1872, and its dam released large quantities of silt and sediment into Roaring Brook and the Lackawanna River, muddying their waters for miles, authorities have said.

Lackawanna County general counsel Donald Frederickson sent a letter to Powell requesting "that your office

open an investigation into this matter and determine if any laws have been violated that would warrant the filing of criminal charges against any entity(s) or individual(s) responsible for this environmental disaster."

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### Good morning



Windy  
High: 38°  
Low: 26°  
Weather, B10

A4 THE TIMES-TRIBUNE

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2024

## PROJECT: Sediment release came amid work on \$17M rehabilitation

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In a reply to The Times-Tribune seeking comment, Powell said, "I just received the commissioners' letter and I am well aware of the devastation that has occurred to the river. I plan to meet with the (state) Attorney General's office to determine the best course of action."

The release of sediment occurred as the water company was working on a \$17 million rehabilitation project of the 100 million-gallon reservoir to upgrade the dam structure for stability and to continue to meet regulations under the state Department of Environmental Protection, water company spokeswoman Susan Turcmanovich said last week.

The project, which began in October and 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.

In response to the commissioners' stance, Turcmanovich on Thursday issued the following PAW statement: "The work currently underway on the Dunmore #7 Dam is part of a \$17 million dam rehabilitation project required by PA DEP to ensure the dam structure remains stable during extreme weather events and safely passes the Spillway Design Flood in accordance with DEP dam safety requirements. In addition to rock dams that were installed to hold sediment back, a larger four-foot high rip-rap dam was recently installed across Roaring Brook to better control silt sediment from flowing downstream. The company also closed one of the reservoir's water release valves, which has reduced the volume of water currently being released from the dam. Penn-

*'I see it more as a state responsibility and something DEP would advance to state attorney general's office, if they were going to do anything at that level.'*

**Bernie McGurl**  
Senior project manager,  
Lackawanna River  
Conservation Association

sylvania American Water has been working with DEP and will continue to do so in continuing efforts to mitigate and reduce silt from entering the river. All necessary permits were obtained prior to the work commencing, and we are continuing to operate within those permit conditions."

She added that both valves are now closed.

The commissioners noted

the sediment was believed to have been released Feb. 2 during the project at the 152-year-old reservoir on Roaring Brook, a major tributary of the Lackawanna River.

"I'm absolutely outraged that this incident was allowed to occur," Gaughan said. "It essentially flushed down the drain the decades of hard work to restore the Lackawanna River. We are asking the district attorney to open an investigation into this incident so that someone will be held accountable."

McGloin added, "Improving and maintaining the quality of life in our area is something that we all take great pride in daily. To have a major miscalculation like this by the water company and DEP is astounding. It has potentially caused damage that could take years for our waterways to recover from. We are urging our district attorney's office to investigate this disaster to determine if any laws have been violated."

Chermak said, "The

thought that a contractor or anyone else would blatantly discharge any sort of pollutant into any of our waterways is outrageous. I would request a full investigation into this situation as soon as possible. We've worked hard over the years cleaning up damaged and polluted waterways throughout the area and cannot allow this to continue."

A DEP spokeswoman did not immediately comment and said the agency likely would not comment.

The DEP has been conducting its own probe of the situation after learning about it Feb. 4.

Environmental advocates of clean waterways fear that ecological damage from the sediment will significantly impair them and their aquatic wildlife of macroinvertebrates and fish for some time, perhaps years.

Lackawanna River Conservation Association Senior Project Manager Bernie McGurl said he thinks jurisdiction for any investigation likely would stay with the

state.

"I'm a little surprised," McGurl said about the commissioners' statement. "I see it more as a state responsibility and something DEP would advance to state attorney general's office, if they were going to do anything at that level."

McGurl still can't quite believe that the sediment situation occurred. PAW recently did similar dam rehabilitation projects to larger reservoirs, including the Nesbitt Reservoir in Spring Brook Twp. and the Elmhurst Reservoir straddling Elmhurst and Roaring Brook townships, and those did not have any large-scale releases of silt or sediment.

At the No. 7 Reservoir dam project, PAW apparently "didn't have any fail-safe, they didn't have any backup plan," McGurl said. "It was just a colossal blunder; how it could have happened and the devastation that it has caused. It's just incredible."

**Contact the writer:**  
jlockwood@scrantontimes.com;  
570-209-5893.