

LOCAL NEWS

Had it up to here

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NORTH HUDSON -- Everything was fine at the mouth of Lake Mallalieu -- until the water came rushing in.

In an effort to take water pressure off a failing dam upstream on the Willow River flowage, the Department of Natural Resources breached the structure in September 2015. The breach completed the draining of Little Falls Lake -- a necessary step, DNR officials said, in the process of replacing the dam at Willow River State Park.

Yet even after the breach, North Hudson resident Lon Feia said there wasn't a problem in the water at his property. He lives near the mouth of Lake Mallalieu, which, like Little Falls Lake, serves as a man-made impoundment along the Willow River just above the St. Croix River.

Then came a 3.5-inch rainfall in November.

The water level outside Feia's property climbed about three feet after the deluge.

And then it receded.

“Everything,” Feia said of the water outside his property just above Mallalieu, “was covered with this black silt.”

That unsightly, stinky pile only grew after spring meltwater poured back through the waterway.

Feia is now left with an island of muck near his dock that measures more than 2 feet high, 40 feet wide and 120 feet long. The lower unit of his boat motor is immersed in the sediment and won't be usable until it's gone.

He admits that it's not a health concern and is largely a cosmetic issue, but a problem nonetheless.

“It's a tremendous problem, and we need to be able to address it,” Feia said.

He and other Lake Mallalieu Association members raised concerns May 11 during the organization's annual meeting at the Hudson House. The meeting included a lengthy presentation on effects from the Little Falls Lake project and brought a top DNR official, along with Sen. Sheila Harsdorf.

While Feia's shoreline area appeared to take the brunt of the sediment runoff, residents from around the lake described how silt

made its way to the impoundment.

Association President Doug Meyers said water depth measurements at 82 properties revealed an average depth loss of 11 inches from 2015 due to sediment entering the lake.

“When they breached the dam, we got a lake full of silt and there’s no getting around that,” association member Jim Thomas said.

The association had negotiated a draw-down plan last year with the DNR that called for Little Falls Lake water to be drained in a spill-through manner that would prevent most sediment from rushing through.

“That part was very successful,” Meyers said.

The process proved effective until the agency decided to remove a large section dam to complete the draw-down in the fall of 2015.

That method pulled the water from the bottom of Little Falls Lake, which association members said took massive amounts of silt with it that carried its way to Lake Mallalieu.

The resulting accumulation of sediment in Lake Mallalieu now leaves its members wondering what will be done about a problem they say was caused by the DNR.

Right now? Nothing, said DNR Regional Manager Dan Baumann.

“If we do something now, you can expect you’re going to be back in there,” he told the group.

He told association members that the 11 inches of buildup isn’t a fair representation of what’s there. Baumann said the silt has not yet settled and compressed. When it does, that accumulation will be lower, he said.

Feia, who can rest a five-gallon scoop bucket on top of the pile of sediment abutting the dock on his property, said from

his perspective there doesn't appear to be anything left to settle.

"It's scoopable, it's dredgeable," he said.

The Little Falls Lake project has \$8 million set aside for replacement of the dam, a process that Department of Administration officials said could now be complete as soon as August 2019.

Lake Mallalieu Association members wondered aloud at the meeting if either some funding for the project can be deployed for lake cleanup -- or if other funding can be tapped.

Harsdorf said all efforts are being made to get the dam built as soon as possible.

"We'll do what we can to expedite the process," she said. "The impact on Lake Mallalieu is a big concern."

Asked directly by an association member if state money could be deployed to clean up Mallalieu, Harsdorf said that possibility can't be ruled out. The final Little Falls Lake dam cost project cost should be finalized in February 2017, she said, noting that lawmakers will be working on the state's budget at that time.

"Let's see what that project cost is," she said.

In the meantime, Harsdorf called on association members to work in concert with lawmakers to move the project ahead.

"The legislators from this area are committing to getting the funding to make this happen," she said.

For Feia, the process is ongoing. He said the DNR has been working with him as he seeks a way to clear the sediment that barricades his access to the waterway.

He said he's willing to move the sediment on his own by blasting the silt back into the channel. He said he'd like to clear it out -- not just so he can get his boat off the lift, but so the eyesore is gone this summer when his daughter gets married on his property.

The problem for him is that the state requires him to get a permit to do so. Feia said the DNR is working with him on the issue -- though not necessarily as quickly as he'd like.

“They are attempting to address it, but it seems awfully cumbersome,” he said.

Feia said he has been encouraged by talks with Harsdorf and others at the state level as he pursues a solution.

“She understands our concerns and wants to help remedy the situation,” he said, also crediting the DNR for its willingness to work with him. “I don't mind doing the work, but I shouldn't have to. They caused this.”