

LOW LAKE WATER LEVEL UPDATE – September 6, 2022

Below is a letter that Courte Oreilles Lakes Association sent to its members regarding low lake water levels. The letter provides information on why lake levels have been low the past few years and what its members can do to support getting the lake levels back to historical levels and keeping them at that level. Although Whitefish was not included in the 1955 decision discussed in the COLA letter, the Billy Boy dam affects lake levels on Whitefish like Big LCO and Grindstone. The WLPOA Board supports the efforts being undertaken by COLA and believes it is in the best interest of our members to:

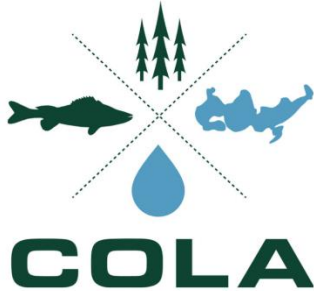
1) WLPOA has started a petition that will be submitted to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The petition request that Sawyer County and the Wisconsin DNR re-assess current lake level measurement processes and maximum/minimum metrics for improved water level management of the Billy Boy flowage dam so as to prevent unacceptable low water levels and restriction of boating usage on Whitefish Lake. Sign the WLPOA petition by September 13 at the Beechmoor Restaurant, or contact the WLPOA President (pres@whitefishlakepoa.org);

2) Let your voice be heard by the DNR. Send an email to Jacob Druffner, the DNR's water management engineer in the DNR's Spooner office, at jacob.druffner@wisconsin.gov. Explain in your own words how your use and enjoyment of the lake have been affected by the lowered lake levels and that you want the Billy Boy Dam managed to restore and maintain water levels to their higher, expected, historic levels. Please also send a copy of your message to Jane Getting, President Whitefish Lake Property Owners Association at Pres@whitefishlakepoa.org

Thank you,

WLPOA Low Lake Water Level Committee

Courte Oreilles Lakes Association



What Happened To The Water?

In case you're wondering about the water levels of the LCO lakes...

For more than 50 years, Sawyer County has managed the dam on the Billy Boy Flowage to maintain the water levels on the upstream lakes. To measure lake levels, the County has used a gauge located on the Big LCO side of the Thoroughfare Road bridge between Big LCO and Little LCO. All those years, property owners relied on these water levels for placing docks and lifts, boating, taking their boats between the lakes, swimming, recreation, and maintaining water quality, the fishery, and property values.

In June 2017, after a new bridge was completed on Thoroughfare Road, Sawyer County placed a new gauge at the Little LCO end of the abutment of the new bridge. In April 2021, this gauge was moved back to the upstream, Big LCO, end of the bridge abutment. The change came about because of a 1955 Public Service Commission (the predecessor to the DNR) decision that was found in the archives of Sawyer County's Conservation Department. This decision established minimum and maximum water levels for Little LCO, Big LCO, and Grindstone, with the objective of holding each of these lakes "...at this same elevation."

The DNR has authority over dams and waterways in Wisconsin. Despite decades of ignoring the 1955 decision and allowing the County to maintain higher water levels, which became the actual, historic water levels, the DNR decided it was necessary to comply with the 1955 decision and on May 18, 2021, ordered Sawyer County to manage the dam to lower water levels. According to the gauge at the bridge, this would require lowering the

lake levels more than six inches to reach the maximum level and more than one foot to reach the minimum.

The County complied with the DNR's directive to lower water levels by opening all the gates on the dam. Because any change in the gates at the Billy Boy Dam can dramatically affect the water level in Little LCO within 24 hours, the result was a drastic lowering of the water level in Little LCO. Because of the narrow passageway between Big LCO and Little LCO, Big LCO is rarely affected by changes at the Billy Boy Dam. But keeping the gates wide open for over a year did affect the water levels on the bigger lake. The County estimates that water levels in the entire system—Big LCO, Little LCO, and Grindstone — were lowered by one foot just from this action alone. The droughts of 2021 and 2022 have compounded the problem.

The County closed the gates on the Billy Boy Dam within the last month, leaving one open to provide water to the Couderay River. That is a necessary first step, particularly for Little Lac Courte Oreilles, which will benefit most from the change. Over the long term, Big Lac Courte Oreilles and Grindstone will also benefit if our current drought comes to an end.

What You Can Do

To maintain these higher water levels, your voice must be heard by the DNR. **Send an email to Jacob Druffner, the DNR's water management engineer in the DNR's Spooner office**, at jacob.druffner@wisconsin.gov. Explain in your own words how your use and enjoyment of the lake have been affected by the lowered lake levels and that you want the Billy Boy Dam managed to restore and maintain water levels to their higher, expected, historic levels. Please send a copy of your message to Chris Bedwell, COLA president - president@cola-wi.org.
