

Lockport Union-Sun & Journal Online

June 20, 2014

Lake level decision draws ire

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Lockport Union-Sun & Journal

Lockport Union-Sun & Journal — The International Joint Commission announced this week Plan 2014 is its preferred option for regulating water levels and flows of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. And local leaders don't like it.

The plan controls the water level in Lake Ontario by adjusting the flow of water through a dam in the St. Lawrence River, creating higher and lower water levels than before. The commission forwarded its recommendations involving Plan 2014, in the works since 2001, to the federal governments in Canada and the United States for consideration.

In a statement, the IJC said Plan 2014 “provides more natural water level fluctuations while reducing the damage from extreme high and low water-level events to nearly the same extent as the current plan.” It helps protect all users from extreme water levels, provides for the largest wetland restoration project in the region, and prepares for a changing Great Lakes future, the commission said.

Endorsed unanimously by the five-person commission, the IJC said Plan 2014 should be implemented as soon as possible.

“We have considered not only the advice of scientists and engineers, but also listened to a great deal of public input from home owners, boaters, shippers and the people who live on and use these waters,” said U.S. Section Chairperson Lana Pollack, in a statement.

The IJC said extensive field work and analysis during the study showed the current regulation plan was harming ecosystem health by substantially degrading 64,000 acres of shoreline wetlands. After consideration of other plans, the IJC said it decided Plan 2014 “offers the best opportunity to reverse some of the harm done while balancing upstream and downstream uses and minimizing damage to shoreline protection structures.”

Local leaders disagree, saying the IJC is ignoring what the commission heard in a series of public hearings. Niagara County Legislator David E. Godfrey, R-Wilson, said the higher levels of water would erode shoreline properties, driving down property values.

The commission refused to address what will be increased costs to property owners for shoreline protection from storm surges.

“If you're going to cause us damage, give us something to protect ourselves,” Godfrey said. “It's very disturbing.”

There is concern the IJC's plan could have some economic impact, possibly hurting Wilson harbor and Olcott. It may cause boating season to end prematurely, officials say.

"It's going to be a problem at some point in time," said Newfane Supervisor Timothy Horanburg. "I just don't understand... I don't think there was a single public hearing where there were any positive comments."

State Sen. George Maziarz, R-Newfane, called the IJC's decision "deeply disappointing."

"Despite proclaiming to want their input, the IJC is ignoring the needs of vocal residents and communities on Lake Ontario's southern shore whose property will be hurt by this plan," Maziarz said in a written statement. "The extreme variations in water levels that may occur with Plan 2014 could have severe long-term ramifications. Where will the IJC be when these property owners need help with erosion mitigation and land restoration?"

"In short, the IJC's position shows no concern for the economic fate of our state's people and places. We need a new balance in protecting our freshwater resources and protecting our real property, but this plan is severely lacking and should be rejected by our federal government."

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