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February 6, 2006
From The Morning Call

Extra dam releases in Carbon planned again for recreation

By Sarah Fulton
Special to The Morning Call

A plan to increase the number of water releases from the Francis E. Walter Dam in Carbon County to boost rafting and other recreation on the Lehigh River last summer worked, despite being curtailed by dry weather, officials say.

The 2005 flow management plan could not be fully carried out because a lack of rain often left the dam's water level below what was needed for the releases.

Still, the extra releases persuaded officials to again increase the number of releases for summer 2006, a report to be unveiled this month says.

Details will be made public at a workshop at 6:30 p.m. Feb. 16 at Split Rock Lodge in Lake Harmony.

"I think it's gone very well. The agencies are communicating among each other," said Chris Kocher of the Wildlands Conservancy of Lower Macungie Township. "Much like last year, we are going to facilitate a public forum to gain input."

A consortium of state and federal agencies — including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wildlands Conservancy, state Fish and Boat Commission, state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and Delaware River Basin Commission — will hold the meeting and take public comments.

Last year was the first year the agencies stepped up releases at the dam in an effort to improve rafting, kayaking and boating conditions; to create a better environment for fish, amphibians and reptiles; and to improve fishing opportunities.

The Army Corps, which operates the dam near White Haven, last summer planned 15 extra releases of 750 cubic feet of water per second — with 22 in all — to pump money into the local economy.

The releases were made possible when a new connector road was built, letting the dam fill to a higher level and allowing for three times as many releases.

But extended dry conditions — August rainfall was well below average and there was virtually no area rainfall in September, according to the National Weather Service — left the reservoir at normal levels, unable to accommodate the extra releases, the Army Corps said.

That prompted cancellation of the last five of those weekend water releases, from the end of May to Oct. 2.

Still, since the release plan was unveiled a year ago, the Army Corps has gotten feedback from 375 members of the public interested in the state of the river.

Most comments were supportive of the plan and its expected impact on fishing and boating, Kocher said.

"The Army Corps is receiving public comments and modifying the plan as such," Kocher said. "The amount of public involvement has been great."

The dam holds about 2 billion gallons of water above the Lehigh Gorge and was installed to prevent flooding in towns downstream, such as Jim Thorpe, Lehighton and Walnutport, all the way to Easton where the Lehigh converges with the Delaware River.

Owners of white-water rafting businesses based in White Haven and Jim Thorpe had lauded the extra release program as a boost for their businesses and visitors' enjoyment on the river.

The dam reservoir also is available to the public for fishing and boating.

Pocono area tourism officials had estimated Carbon area businesses would see a total annual revenue increase of \$34 million because of the increase in rafting days.

Officials have said about 6,200 people raft on the river each release day, and groups often schedule rafting trips around releases when the water is deeper and the rapids are the most challenging.

Businesses such as bed and breakfasts, hotels, restaurants, gas stations and shops also benefit from the water releases that draw more

visitors.

At the Feb. 16 conference, the public is invited to meet with agency personnel beginning at 6:30 p.m. The corps and its partners will address the execution of the 2005 plan and details of the 2006 plan at 7 p.m.

At 8 p.m., officials will form small groups to discuss the new plan. The workshop will conclude at 9 p.m.

Sarah Fulton is a freelance writer.

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