

Minutes: Big Chetac and Birch Lakes Association Committee Meeting – July 24, 2017

Facilitator: Dave Blumer, LEAPS

Minutes prepared by LEAPS based on a digital recording of the meeting.

1) Call to Order/Roll Call

The meeting was called to order at 2:07pm at the Birchwood Senior Center

Participants:

BCABLA: Mark Robinson and Bob Reynolds

Town of Birchwood: Romaine Quinn

Town of Edgewater: Bill Zimmer

Fred Thomas Resort: Julie Thomas Telitz

Birch Lake Representative – Jay Hatcher

WDNR: Alex Smith

Absent:

Gerry Johnson, Red Cedar River Partnership; John Depoister, Village of Birchwood; Jim Delmedico, Maple Terrace Resort

Bob Reynolds and Jay Hatcher were both present for the first time and introduced themselves to the rest of the Committee. Jay Hatcher-family one of the first places on the lake, lives on Big Birch, retired coast guard and high school teacher. Bob Reynolds – on the lake since 1980, was a BCABLA president and board member, retired teacher from the Milwaukee area. Likes to golf.

2) Approval of Previous Minutes

Minutes from the June 19, 2017 Stakeholders Committee Meeting were approved: Motion made by Mark Robinson, seconded by Romaine Quinn, passed unanimously.

3) Facilitator's Update

Lake Use and Fishing Success Survey for the first three weeks in June were reviewed in a handout provided by Dave. Crappie catch down, bluegill catch up, walleyes and northern catch down, bass catch up. Results supported assumptions made after the first review made in early June for May results. Fishing experience was pretty evenly spread between the five levels: excellent, good average, poor, and terrible.

Only about half of the resorts currently participating in the survey are actually collecting surveys. No new resorts have been added. Some resorts say constituents don't want to fill out the survey, others say the public is very interested. It basically depends on the level of effort and interest from the resort owners. This is one more thing to focus on in an already busy time period. Very few of the folks filling out the form are being contacted by the WDNR creel survey agent.

Questions: Are the results from the bass tournaments being tracked somewhere? Are we getting any data from the WDNR Creel Survey? Is the target fishing species changing?

Answers: There may or may not be data available, depending on whether the tournament was registered with the WDNR or not. An action item is to track down this data if it is available. The WDNR Creel data will be published at some point, but at the present time we don't have direct access to the data. It might be interesting to get the WDNR creel survey person to meet with our group to talk about what she is seeing and hearing. Panfish is still the target fish, although some are coming in to target northern, bass, and walleye, even perch.

July is typically the month when more families come to the resorts. The survey is inaccurately tracking lake use time other than fishing as the resort customers are not filling out the survey if they are not fishing.

Follow-up from the June Fisheries Discussion was provided by Dave. Specifically Dave mentioned the Tribal Walleye Spearing Results that were provided by the LCO. They basically speared their designated quota in every year on record except during the three CLP treatment years (2013-15). It was mentioned that ice out in 2013 and 2014 was very late, which was likely the reason not much spearing was done in those years. Contact with LCO Fisheries Manager confirmed that the drop in harvest was only coincidence, not directly or indirectly related to the herbicide application that took place during those three years.

Dave also provided data from Max Wolter about the impacts of bass tournaments on spawning fish. The negative impact is minimal, and not likely to negatively impact spawning success in general in the lake. Another paper provided data from an internal DNR study on the effects of reducing the size limits on bass to bass tournaments in Long Lake, Washburn County. The impacts were minimal but more positive than negative. Bass size tended to go up a little.

4) Participant Updates/Comments/Concerns

Jay Hatcher – Birch Lake Representative

Dave filled Jay in on what is expected of the Stakeholders Committee Representatives – to take what we discuss to their stakeholders and to report back to the committee concerns and questions that people have about what we are doing. Then Jay was given an opportunity to talk about his concerns and comments.

Jay is most concerned about shoreland degradation caused by erosion from waves created by several different sources (wind, boats, and jet skis). Weed issues fluctuate on the lake. Doesn't like rip rap but does not see many alternatives that work. Plus permits for rip rap are difficult to get approved.

This brought up a discussion about lake education to help reduce issues that are caused when lake users are not familiar with the impacts caused by waves or do not understand why rules and restrictions are put in place. This could be a part of lake stewardship or lake protection goals in the new management plan.

Julie Thomas Telitz – Fred Thomas Resort

Julie again reiterated that many of the resorts do not like the concept of harvesting to control weed growth. Some discussion about harvesting results on other lakes was had. Also questions about how long harvesting lasts. Also about how harvesting might be a part of an overall management plan, but not sole focus of the aquatic plant management plan.

Bob Reynolds – BCABLA

Bob mentioned that several people he had spoken too were concerned about water level and how to much water was let out making it difficult to get boats of the lifts. Also brought up the dam repair tax which led to more discussion about the status of the dam repair project and how costs were to be absorbed.

Alex Smith – WDNR

Alex mentioned that he has not heard much from the local constituency about the Big Chetac Project. Which he thought was a good thing.

Bill Zimmer – Town of Edgewater

Bill was concern over CLP mapping in the lake to help monitor the impacts/results of whatever management program is put in place. He felt it very important to map CLP annually, and that this should be in the management plan. Bill was also interested in more information about the dam project.

The Shoreland Evaluation Project included in the new lake planning grant was also discussed at this time. The actual on the water portion of the survey including photos, evaluation, and woody debris has been completed.

Romaine Quinn – Town of Birchwood

Romaine again indicated that the rest of the Town Supervisors continue to be interested in this process. He mentioned that the Town is still debating the use of herbicides in the management plan. Not quite against them, but not readily in support either. This is an ongoing discussion.

Mark Robinson – BCABLA

Mark mentioned that he has good candidates to help fill out the BCABLA Board and expects to have a meeting in late August to secure these new board members and fill officer positions. He also mentioned that several volunteers are looking for training for AIS monitoring again. LEAPS could do it, Kris Larsen could do it, and Pat Brown from Sawyer County could do it. Mark should contact Alex or Dave to set something up. He mentioned that the sign on the landing had fallen down, but was salvaged. Putting new signs at the landings was mentioned as a new project and a possible goal for the plan. Mark also asked about a notice he received from the Washburn County Lakes and River Association about membership.

It was suggested that the BCABLA should be a part of WCLARA and even the Sawyer County Lakes Forum as both are good institutions.

John Depoister from the Village of Birchwood, Jim Delmedico from Maple Terrace Resort, and Gerry Johnson from the Red Cedar group were absent from the meeting so were not able to add comment.

5) Discussions

During the discussion phase of this meeting, it was hoped that goals for the fishery, lake use, and water quality could be wrapped up with some motions made as to what to include as goals in the new management plan, with the intent of taking these goals to the general constituency for additional input and comment.

Fisheries Management Discussion

This discussion continued from the June Stakeholders Committee with Dave asking some very specific questions. Specifically, how should a fisheries management component of the plan be included? Should it be stating goals and objectives right now or rather waiting to establish a sub-committee to help develop an actual fisheries management plan similar to what was provided by Max Wolter of the WDNR for another lake that would guide fisheries management goals, objectives and actions on the lake? If the decision was the latter, than a goal would be built into the new plan that would set timelines for getting a Fisheries Management Plan in place and how it would be done.

Mark liked how the sample fisheries management plan was laid out and felt we should include the development of something like it in the new lake management plan. We should outline goals for general fish species which means determining what the lakes should be. General thoughts were to say it is a panfish and walleye lake first as these two species are tied together, and then to manage it for a strong population of bass and northern pike. Bob mentioned that he through the designation of Big Chetac as a walleye lake came from the Ceded Territory Treaty Rights set up by Judge Barbara Cragg in the 1980's. Julie felt that managing the fishery, particularly for panfish sounded strange. The lake has a sustained panfish fishery and fishing is cyclical anyway, so how do you manage it. Alex mentioned that the size limits and bag limits on bass and bluegills is an example of how to do it. Alex also mentioned that Fisheries Management Plan probably does more to manage people's expectations for a lake rather than

manage the fish themselves. The question to be reviewed is whether management strategies put in place, like the limit on bluegills is actually working to improve the fishery. Both Mark and Bill felt that an outline of the broader goals without specifics should be in the new plan. The final details could be decided during a public fisheries management planning process led by the Max Wolter of the WDNR and general representatives of the community, maybe through a sub-committee established with only that focus in mind.

Dave asked for a formal motion to include broad goals for the fishery in the new plan. A motion was made by Bob Reynolds:

“Something dealing with the fishery, in this three lake area, and the formation of a committee to look at how the fishery can be improved and how the plan can be used to facilitate this (somewhat paraphrased at the digression of Dave)”

The motion was seconded by Bill Zimmer. The motion passed unanimously.

Some objectives of this section of the plan could be education, improve habitat, and a plan to accommodate changes as they come up, similar to what just recently happened with the Red Cedar group.

Lake Use Discussion

Dave introduced this discussion by indicating that how a lake is used is an important part of planning. On the Big Chetac system indications are that recreational use of the lake is increasing. Fishing is still the main use, but recreation is also important. A lake use plan could address concerns that have been voiced related to water skiing and other recreational motor sports, no wake areas, etc.

Jay was in favor of a lake use plan that addresses boating, water quality, fishing and wildlife but wonders how data would be gotten to measure the impacts of changing lake use. Julie mentioned education of lake users, maybe even with a lake patrol sponsored by the BCABLA. She also mentioned the ordinance in place that limits waterskiing and other recreational activities involving watercraft to hours between 11:00am and 5:00pm. It was unclear as of the July meeting if the ordinance in the Town of Edgewater was also in the Town of Birchwood and the Village of Birchwood. The thought is that it was not. A review of the ordinances in place, and then making recommendations as to how and if those should be modified or if new ones should be added, should be included as a goal in the new management plan. Bill suggested that we need a plan that can be presented to the stakeholders for discussion and approval, and that it would be nice if we could get one plan that would be reviewable by all stakeholders. It was agreed that this is what we need. Bill also asked if a plan was in formulation yet. Dave’s answer was no, but a presentation of the goals we come up with can be done and will be done.

Dave asked for a motion to include lake use goals in the new management plan.

Julie made the motion:

“Lake use should be a part of the new management plan.”

This was seconded by Jay. It was passed unanimously.

Water Quality Discussion

Dave introduced this discussion by referring back to some of the water quality data that exists for the three lakes. Water quality impacts everything, and everything impacts water quality. Fisheries management, lake use, aquatic plant management, shoreland management, boat use, tributaries etc. all impact the lakes. So how do we want to address this in the new plan?

The old plan addressed it with a goal of reducing the number of days the lake experiences severe algal blooms. This was considered inadequate for the new plan. WDNR task force recommendations suggested picking a numerical value such as ppb of phosphorus or depth of Secchi disk readings.

The standard phosphorus concentration set for shallow drainage lakes if they are to maintain their lake uses is 40 ppb. Values in Big Chetac are double or more of this, even in years with a lot of flushing from rain events. Bill asked what would be expected right now if a sample was taken, given all the rainfall through late July. The value would likely be lower than past years, but still very high, greater than the 40 ppb.

There are numerical values for chlorophyll as well which could be included as goals in the plan. The current goal from the World Health Organization is 50 ppb chlorophyll.

Jay asked what the sources of phosphorus to the lake were. Alex responded by saying it depended on the watershed. In some cases a heavily farmed watershed causes problems. This is not the case for Big Chetac. It has phosphorus deposited over decades building up in the lake. It also has a fair amount of phosphorus in the ground water that feeds the lake. A historic paleocore (sample of sediment from the bottom of the lake) identified several periods of high phosphorus in the lake that were worse than current data. It also indicated that the system has always been high in phosphorus so trying to get the phosphorus level in the lake to a very low concentration is probably not realistic. Because internal loading is high and because ground water is high in phosphorus, external sources of phosphorus, even small amounts, can have major impacts on the lake.

Alum was brought up again during this discussion. Alum has been used for many years to reduce phosphorus content in lakes. A study has been completed on Big Chetac that suggests alum applied to the deep water in the north basin could improve water quality. The toxicity of alum was asked about. Generally alum application has no lasting negative environmental impacts, particularly once it bonds with phosphorus which creates a nearly unbreakable bond in nature. IF too much is applied there may be excess aluminum that settles out to form a matrix that eliminates its usefulness in capturing phosphorus. This means more is put in and paid for that the lake needs, making costs higher than they need to be. Research and preparation can reduce this likelihood.

There is some benthic toxicity, but it has never been shown that a lake cannot recover quickly from the disturbance to become more diverse and healthy in terms of benthic organisms that it was prior to application. Its application may also remove very small plankton from the water column immediately

after applied when the floc created sinks to the bottom of the lake. But again the effects are short-lived and the entire lake would not be treated anyway.

There was some question about whether alum should be considered in Big Birch Lake as well. We know it has no oxygen from early summer through fall below 10-30 feet, meaning that there is no oxygen in the bottom 40- 60 feet of water. This could be contributing a large amount of phosphorus to the system. Testing is being done this summer to address that question.

Bill commented that he had heard that alum does not work in shallow water. Alex responded that it would only be applied to deeper water in the north basin, and maybe Birch if that were a conclusion of the data currently being collected on Birch Lake. Still it is true that we don't know for sure how long an alum treatment would last, even if applied over several years' verses all at one time. Part of this vagueness is due to the fact that the watershed of Big Chetac is not the main contributor of phosphorus.

Dave mentioned that if alum were applied, it might improve water clarity enough that plant growth would increase – either native vegetation or CLP, or both. This would mean continued plant management to maintain access and navigability on the lakes.

Bill asked if there were any easy to read documents about alum and its impact. Alex suggested Google Scholar. He also suggested that an action item in the plan should be getting Bill James, a preeminent scholar when it comes to alum application, who is also local at UW-STOUT to come speak to the constituency of the lakes. Implementing an alum treatment will take a lot of public input and education, but remains a very viable alternative to improve water quality in the lakes.

Julie asked about Blue Hills runoff being high in phosphorus. This is likely the case, except that it is somewhat limited. Much of the runoff goes to other places then Big Chetac. Groundwater generally flows from the northwest to southeast through the lake, which limits the water from the Blue Hills. In addition, there is a moraine (ridge) that separates the Sissabagama lakes from the Chetac Chain which further limits high phosphorus runoff.

It was decided that a numerical value should be included in the new plan along with some other goals related to the education of the constituency about shoreland improvements and alum, however the discussion was not completed, and no motions had been formally made by the end of the meeting.

This discussion will continue during the August 14th Stakeholders Committee meeting.

6) Next Meetings

It was decided that another stakeholders committee meeting was needed in mid-August to try and wrap up much of the discussion about goals for water quality, aquatic plant management, and a few other things. It was also decided that a Public Meeting should be held before Labor Day Weekend to update the constituency on what has been discussed in the committee and to give the public a chance to weigh in on goals that are being recommended. The public meeting will present suggested goals and provide discussion and input from the general public.

The next stakeholders committee meeting will be on August 14th.

The Public Meeting will be on August 29th.

The meeting was adjourned at around 4:25pm, with the expectation that discussion will continue during the August 14th meeting.

Respectfully submitted by Dave Blumer, LEAPS (completed August 13, 2017)