

Big Chetac and Birch Lakes Stakeholders Committee Public Meeting Minutes

Proposed Management Goals

When: Tuesday, August 29, 2017 7:00-9:00pm

Location: Venue moved from the Commons to the Small Gym at the request of the Birchwood Schools

Attendance (based on sign-in at the door):

Stakeholders Committee Members: Jay Hatcher, Romaine Quinn, Gerry Johnson, Bob Reynolds, Bill Zimmer, and Alex Smith

General Public – 11 members of the general public

Introduction

Dave brought the audience up to speed on what had been done since the beginning of 2017, with a focus on management goals that have been developed by stakeholders committee and LEAPS.

Dave called attention to handouts: one sheet with goals listed; and identified himself and his affiliation. Dave summarized previous activities completed with a goal of updating and improving the 2010 management plan and finding a path to move forward to maintain or improve the lake system.

Dave had a presentation set up.

Dave indicated that the meeting would be recorded and in his presentation talked about public notice in Chronotype, Early Bird, Spooner Advocate, and Weekender North. Notice was supposed to be in the Sawyer County Record, but was put in the Weekender North by APG Media instead. Notice was also published on the BCABLA webpage, two towns and village webpages, and Birchwood School Calendar.

Background on Stakeholders Committee (Slide 3)

Dave provided a background for the BCABLA Stakeholder Committee. It is a group of people working over the last 8 months with the existing management plan to come up with way to move management forward. It was formed Jan 2017 and meets monthly. This is the second of three public meetings in 2017. The first was in May, the last is planned for October 28. The Committee wants to increase the level of public involvement and is looking for feedback about goals set up in last couple months. The Committee is still in the planning phase and has not reached implementation stage.

Dave talked about the membership of stakeholders group with members representing different parts of the constituency. Dave acts as a facilitator, and Alex Smith is a DNR resource person. Members of the Committee present at the meeting identified themselves, what group they represent, and gave information on how to contact them.

Dave explained that the Committee took information collected about goals from last public meeting (May), and from the existing management plan and have been working on new goals ... fisheries, lakes water quality, plants, wildlife, invasive species ... lots of different topics discussed in terms of where we should be going.

The Committee also supported an application to DNR for lake management planning grant sponsored by BCABLA, and administered by the Lake Association, Stakeholders Committee, LEAPS, and the WDNR. Included in it are water quality testing, aquatic plant surveys, shoreland habitat assessment on all three lakes, a fishing success survey, and support for the Stakeholders Committee. Much of the new data collected in the grant funded project is centered on Birch and Little Birch Lake where there is not much past data to work with in the new planning process.

Lake Use and Fishing Success Survey (Slide 7)

Dave presented the latest details on the Fishing Success Survey based on sheets picked up the day before this meeting. The purpose of the survey is to quantify fishing success of people staying at resorts in terms of how they view their fishing experience. To date there have been 361 surveys collected from 8 participating resorts. Participation by resorts and potential survey respondents is voluntary, so there are about 5 of the resorts taking the survey pretty seriously with forms handed out so that people will hopefully fill out information requested. Current results represent 975 people, although these are not all different people. Often one group will fill out multiple days' worth of surveys. In total, a little more than 2000 hours of fishing were recorded, with 2.1 hours of fishing per person on average. On average, 9.7 fish per person are being caught, mostly panfish. The survey results show where people are fishing. The survey also shows what actions besides fishing are being done. Confirms comments in 2017 about only a few northern pike being caught and that small walleyes are being caught. The survey results show what fish are caught and how many are kept. There was nothing really surprising in the results, but they are interesting.

Dave also mentioned the WDNR Creel Survey person who spends 40 hours a week on the water through the entire 2017-18 fishing season collecting information about catch rates.

Goals

In this portion of the meeting Dave reviewed each of the 10 goals developed for the new management plan, laying out the written goal for comment, and briefly discussion possible management objectives to be included with each goal. The intent was to get feedback from the audience as to whether they supported a particular goal or not. Objectives were not intended to be final, only possible considerations as the planning process continues.

GOAL 1 – Water Quality (Slide 8)

- *Maintain and/or improve water quality in Big Chetac, Birch, and Little Birch Lakes to make them more able to support a healthy and diverse ecosystem, more appealing, and more attractive for recreation.*

Dave reviewed this goal and possible objectives. Water quality is the one thing that affects everything else on the lake which is why it is the first goal discussed. Dave posed several questions associated with the goal: Do you agree with goal? What should be the objectives? How could the objective be measured? This goal generated a lot of discussion during the Stakeholders Committee meetings, particularly in deciding what should be a target objective to be measured. In the end it was decided that the goal should be broad, with the objectives focusing on actual targets for water quality. The proposed goal was presented to the group and intentionally written very broadly to cover many things associated with a healthy lake ecosystem: fishery, more appealing, healthy aquatic plant community.

Dave discussed how coming up with a target goal for water quality could be based on past data from those years in the last 10 years when the lake was in good shape and satisfactory to many of the constituents and with the intent to make the worst years better. Water quality in the Chetac system is good at times and not so good at times so maybe the objective based on what lake is like when at the best time. Dave took information from last ten years and determined the good and bad “numbers” for total phosphorus, chlorophyll a, and water clarity. Things seem to be going in right direction in last couple of years. Best year in the last ten was in 2009; the next best in 2008, then 2010, then 2011, then 2016. Take average of best years to determine where we want the lake to go. Dave described what information was used to identify values for three water quality parameters and what could be considered reasonable for Big Chetac. Slide 10 reflects those numbers. Dave also indicated that target objectives might have to be different for Birch and Little Birch lakes as they are both different than Big Chetac (Birch is very deep and stratified).

Audience Comments

No. 1 goal should not be water quality ... it should be fisheries. People aren't up here because of water quality, they come up to fish.

In years when lake was treated, the water quality was the worst. 13, 14, 15 are when lake was treated. 2012 was the worst in the last ten years.

We shouldn't be trying to improve a trend that is clear to everyone. Trying to get beyond on what was done in 2010 to determine what to do next.

Open question – if state standards not reasonable ... what should we be reaching for?

Dave continued to discuss phosphorus sources the biggest being internal load, followed by curly leaf pondweed. Dave discussed options for maintaining or improving the water quality. How can we reduce nutrients already in the lake? Application of alum is possible, but won't happen without a whole lot of discussion on if it needs to be done.

We're trying to change lake.

If alum is to be considered lots more study needed. (Dave)

Since chemical treatment, gamefish catch is down in those areas. Investigation should happen to determine cause.

What are the water quality standards? Answer - Each lake may have its own standards. Standards based on lake type mostly.

Was water quality bad through 60'? Answer - Yes, based on paleological (sediment core) study in the late 2000's.

Fish were bigger back in the 60's so poor water quality made the fishery good. With better water quality the fishery is not as good.

Other things affect the fishery as well: fishing pressure, development on shoreline, for example.

The reason water quality is first is because it impacts everything. Sharp drop-offs on these lakes so not a lot of places for plants to grow. Bluegills need plants so not a lot of place for them.

There is some diversity of plants, but not enough. Improving water quality will improve fishing.

Water quality doesn't drive economic livelihood of this community. Important but it shouldn't be the number one goal. A committee that doesn't put fishing number 1 ... makes this person question what's driving the agenda. The Stakeholder Committee should be about fishery not water quality.

Is someone checking water quality at bridge? What are the results? Excessive phosphorus in the water leaving Big Chetac at the outlet should be treated to reduce phosphorus, but not the rest of the lake. This person questions whether the structure of Lake Chetac can be changed. Lake Chetac is no longer a fishery lake; it has been converted to recreational lake overloaded with people using it for recreational not as many fishermen. This planning process is more concerned about lake quality than fishery. We have lost more than 50 percent of fishermen because there aren't as many fish. Why aren't we catching small fish?

Dave ... once we have all the water quality data we might be able to answer some of those questions.

Been on lake since 1912 ... family use it for recreation. Not every stakeholder is out there fishing.

Some people have major problems with recreational use of this lake because of what it does to the lake and shore. Maybe that should be a concentration in the new plan rather than aquatic plant growth.

Dave – stayed tuned, both the fishery and lake use are in future goals.

Goal 2 – Fish (Slide 17)

- *Promote and support a healthy, diverse, and sustainable fishery in Big Chetac, Birch, and Little Birch Lakes*

The fishery is considered to be one, if not the most important aspect of Chetac Chain of Lakes. This entails having a decent fishing population so that people can catch what they want.

The WDNR Fisheries Manager for Sawyer County was brought in for an entire stakeholders committee meeting when the fishery was discussed by the group. The Committee wanted to know about the fishery: what is it? How does it compare to other lakes? Is it worse or better than other lakes? Is it seeing the same problems that other lakes are having? What is causing the problems? Is it to do with vegetation? These are good questions. They are complicated questions, not ones that can be addressed as only a part of the lake management plan. The Fishery deserves a Management Plan all its own.

Let's put together a fishing committee to help answer these questions ... The WDNR brought in a fisheries management plan for another lake. It does not pertain specifically to the Chetac Chain, but addresses questions about what needs to be done and by whom to get the fishery that fishermen want. After determining this, a fisheries management plan tells how to get there and how to make that happen. This plan can have its own goals and objectives that can be measured by a variety of means. We can measure it with surveys and some of the other things that have been brought up. It might be able to answer questions like what are changes that have reduced the walleye fishery. Is it because of silt? Is it a beaver dam? Is it the fact that you can't count on any normal spring anymore? If you screw up the spawning periods you screw the fishery up too. Are the tournaments impacting the fishery in any way? So many questions that it needs to be addressed on its own.

Audience Comments

No fisheries people were invited to be on the Stakeholders Committee because they weren't wanted. How can you talk about fishery when the right people aren't on the committee?

Two such people were asked to be on the committee: one during its formation (this person declined over concern that controversy within the planning process would negatively impact the company he works for); a second person – big in the bass tournament aspect of the fishery was asked to replace Steve Longacre as a Birch Lake representative and declined because he felt there was too much emphasis on walleyes at the present time. .

This Stakeholders Committee can't tackle this alone, even if had fishery people on it because it is too complicated. It needs its own committee. Perhaps some of the people at this meeting can step up to serve on a fisheries committee. Then that committee can work with the lake association and to implement management plan and not just hand it off to the lake association.

Get a group of people that have a primary interest in the fishery together and let them spearhead the development of a Fisheries Management Plan for the system. Get it done, as soon as possible

There are so many big boats and motors ... what impact does that have on the fishery on the lake? The old days are gone, fish are smaller. Perhaps focus on patrolling the lakes better to see what else is going on that affects the fishery.

Size and bag limits impact the fishery. What should they be? Answer – a good question for a Fisheries Management Plan to answer.

Goal 3 – Aquatic Plants (Slide 21)

- *Promote and support aquatic plant management strategies that will help to improve water quality and provide nuisance and navigation relief where necessary without negatively impacting native vegetation and the fishery in Big Chetac, Birch, and Little Birch Lakes*

Dave presented in a slide some information about how aquatic plants, native and non-native impact a lake, both in good ways and bad ways. Dave also reminded folks that algae is a plant.

Dave mentioned that the Stakeholders Committee discussed possible goals for aquatic plant management: reduce nuisance and navigation issues; reduce competition between native and nonnative plants; improve water quality, or any combination of these goals. The Stakeholders Committee concluded that it should be done on the Chetac system for two reasons... to improve water quality and reduce nuisance and navigation issues.

Aquatic plant management to reduce competition between native and non-natives didn't work too well in the first treatments done from 2013 to 2015. Natives didn't respond the way it was hoped they would, so aquatic plant management to do this, is not a goal.

Aquatic plant management can be done by two main methods: physical removal/harvesting and herbicides. Nuisance and navigation relief is primarily a removal activity. Maintaining or improving water quality would primarily be an herbicide activity. If water quality is improved it could lead to additional plant growth. It would likely not change CLP growth as it already grows everywhere it can and grows during the time when water quality is at its best in the lakes.

Harvesting is not cheap – and cost is harder to deal with. Logistics, timing and when it's done, what to do with plants removed, and opinions that harvesting causes a big mess are also limiting factors. Limited CLP management has been shown to not have much impact on water quality, so if CLP management was to be done with the goal of improving water quality, it would have to be done much larger scale.

Aquatic plant management objectives would be measured by feedback from constituents; water quality data; tracking of plant removal; and recovery of aquatic plants.

Audience Comments

It is a big statement by the Stakeholders Committee to accept that application of herbicides did damage to native plants. It did not improve water quality. Applying herbicides would knock out large areas of CLP but will cause other problems like long-term health effects that are never talked about. Herbicides poison the water for swimming, get into the fish we eat. Why isn't this talked about?

Because there is little documentation that suggests when approved herbicides are used according to label guidelines that they do things that harm people and the ecosystem.

There were questions about Lake Ellwood. EWM was aggressively treated with herbicides for nearly 10 years, until it was noticed that there was a noticeable negative impact on the fishery. The study lays out reasons why an herbicide use was stopped for five years, and things are getting better again. Negative impacts to desirable vegetation and bottom critters were indicated. This will happen to Big Chetac if herbicide use is continued.

In most treated lakes, the impacts identified in Lake Elwood are not repeated. There are many reasons for that. But the point is valid. If herbicides are to be used in Big Chetac, Birch, and Little Birch, care needs to be taken to avoid possible negative impacts like in Elwood. Things can be done to make sure Elwood does not happen here. One such thing is frequent aquatic plant survey work.

It was the conclusion of WDNR fishery studies during the treatment years, that the fishery in the fishery in Big Chetac Lake was not negatively impacted by aquatic plant management actions between 2013 and 2015.

Audience Comment: That's because they misinterpreted their own data, either in error or on purpose.

Dave showed preliminary results from summer 2017 aquatic plant survey work on all of Big Chetac Lake. The data is not in from Birch Lake yet. Whole lake aquatic plant survey work was completed in 2008, 2014, and 2017 and comparisons can be made across that time period. The slides reference the number of points at which different species of aquatic plants were found. Overall plants are recovering after the treatment years, but are still below 2008 numbers in many cases.

The larger community should make decisions to complete aquatic plant management (use herbicides), not outsiders (meaning the Stakeholders Committee is made up of outsiders).

Question – Why was 2008 data not included in slide 26? Answer: the preliminary report came back comparing 2014 and 2017. 2008 was not skipped; it just has not been filled in yet.

As a committee member, I just want the audience to know that I am not in favor of anything being introduced into the ecosystem that will cause harm, so all Committee members are not marching in lock step.

The Committee is starting to reach some lower level goals, and voting on them, but this audience member would like to know how individual committee members are voting and how the committee member that is supposed to be representing his constituency is voting.

All votes recorded in the minutes were unanimous. At the beginning of each of the minutes are the people who were present, so that information is out there already.

Goal 4 – Best Management Practices (Slide 28)

- *Promote, plan, and implement nearshore, riparian, and watershed best management practices that will improve fish and wildlife habitat, reduce runoff, and minimize nutrient loading to Big Chetac, Birch, and Little Birch Lakes*

Dave explained this goal this way: Any activity that can be done that can help this lake and if it can be done reasonably and cost effectively it should be done. Keeps the community actively engaged in protecting the lake and encourages cooperation from other stakeholders. This includes your septic system; if it doesn't work fix it.

Possible objectives that could be measured include the number of best management practices (BMPs) implemented, water quality models, wildlife surveys, and other things.

Audience Comments

No ducks on lake. Why is that? Answer – reasons not completely known, but it is the same everywhere, not just on Big Chetac.

Goal 5 – Tracking, Monitoring, and Management Strategy Modification (Slide 31)

Plans are meant to be updated and changed based on changes on the lake. Effective monitoring identifies issues before they become much bigger problems and management strategies can be modified. This goal would allow for thorough evaluation of those management actions implemented as a part of this plan.

Audience Comments

None

Goals 6 - Balance Lake Uses (Slide 34)

- Balance various lake uses on Big Chetac, Birch, and Little Birch Lakes so residents and lake users can share in the many fishing and recreational opportunities that are available.

Lake use has been a great topic of discussion. It's a big lake system; we should be able to come up with a balance that might satisfy the majority ... Is it a recreational lake? Is it a fishing lake? Why can't it be both?

Some worried that fishing will be left on the wayside.

Possible objectives for this goal could include review town ordinances regarding use of lake. Maybe there are some changes that should be made. Maybe buoys and other markers should be considered.

Who is responsible for buoys and landings?

Maybe do more education on the rules and respecting other lake users.

Maybe consider a Lake Constable to help educate lake users and enforce lake rules.

Take an active role in identifying how the lake is used and if those uses are changing and why. Maybe incorporate surveys, make an effort to actively and positively engage with fishing tournaments and other events on the lake.

Audience Comments

Better enforcement of existing lake rules is needed.

Better posting at landings is needed, existing ones are not visually informing.

Why aren't the Government entities more involved? Where is Village involvement? I expect my tax dollars to be used to help manage lake use and to figure out ways to solve problems associated with various lake uses.

Guidelines ignored because people don't know them.

Goal 7 - Invasive Species (Slide 37)

- Reduce the threat that new aquatic invasive species (AIS) will be introduced into and go undetected in Big Chetac, Birch, and Little Birch Lakes.

This is a goal because there are things not in lake now could be in there at any time. Eurasian watermilfoil is one example. Keep new aquatic invasive species (AIS) out. The risk of finding new AIS goes down as knowledge and awareness of constituency goes up.

Objectives that could be included are watercraft inspection, AIS signs at all the landings including resorts, AIS monitoring efforts in the lake, AIS education of all lake users and property owners. Try to identify any new AIS before it becomes a bigger issue. Education and awareness is extremely important.

Audience Comments

Question – What's the best way to find out what EWM looks like? Answer: Many resources, but the best is to have both side by side in person, once you see them both it is easier to tell the differences. Also, attend workshops; there are always a few around every year.

Goal 8 – Improve lake stewardship (Slide 40)

- Encourage and engage lake residents and visitors to be active lake stewards.

Anyone living on lake should care enough to learn how to protect it for generations to come. This goal could be combined with Goal 6.

Lake stewardship means lake users following regulations; people with varying interests have respect for each other; and that lake property owners contribute to protection and enhancement of their lake. This could be done in many ways. Membership in the lake association or a fisheries committee, or other

committee; learning what you can do is another; paying your taxes, giving donations, etc.; and implementing BMPs that help the lake are all other ways.

Maybe a Lake District is needed to support the health of the lake, but this is too big a discussion point to address here. We are nowhere close to that discussion at this time.

Audience Comments

Boating ... pontoons don't care about the lake. DNR should put someone on lake.

Goal 9 – Communication and Collaboration (Slide 43)

- *Improve communication and collaboration between public, local governments, WDNR, and the Big Chetac and Birch Lakes Association to support achievement of shared lake management goals.*

This goal includes working to improve communication, public involvement, and collaboration when implementing lake management planning efforts. Objectives could be to form committees to address hot topics, maintain public posting of all records and studies, public involvement and collaboration in management planning and implementation, annual events to keep the constituency informed and involved, listening forums, guest speakers, collaboration with other resource entities, etc.

Audience Comments

None

Goal 10 – Implementation of the new plan (Slide 47)

- Implement the Big Chetac, Birch, and Little Birch Lakes Management Plan effectively and efficiently with a focus on community and constituent education, information, and involvement.

A management plan not supported by majority of stakeholders sits on shelf and dies. A Management plan can help with soliciting funds. Not intending to be a static document.

Objectives could include annual evaluation, end of planning evaluations, etc. See slide 48.

To be successfully implemented grant funding may be necessary. It may also be necessary to have someone (consultant?) else who perhaps is a neutral body help guide the implementation process

Audience Comments

If people simple want to get rid of the plants we can't improve fishery. The good lord has taken care of Lake Chetak better than we can.

Using ATV's as an example, one audience member mentioned how local ATV clubs and government entities combine their efforts to police trails, improve trails, and just work to make ATV'ing better for everyone who wants to do it. The lake should be treated the same way.

We need police presence coming out to monitor lake use, particularly at busy times.

It is time to have some deliverables from the Stakeholders Committee. We need to have city government more involved. We need to have people doing a better job of getting their hands around the management of this lake.

The Lake association is a critical tool but their function isn't to tell us what we should use.

We want some management of the lakes by lake associations, but we want other stuff coming out as well, not just management.

Studies and plans are important to give focus but need to start accomplishing something.

All lake uses are recreation including tubing and fishing. We need to find way to deal with both sides

Final Public Meeting in 2017

The Stakeholders Committee will likely meet one more time in late September to incorporate comments from this meeting into the management plan and to identify objectives and actions that will help meet the goals included in the new plan.

After this, the public will again be given an opportunity to weigh in with their concerns and questions. A draft version of the final Goals, Objectives, and Actions to be included in the new management plan will be made available to the public prior to the next public meeting scheduled for October 28th. The time and place of this final public meeting in 2017 is yet to be determined.

Dave reminded audience members to use the post-cards or contact him directly if there were questions and concerns not addresses during this August meeting. Dave provided his card to anyone who wanted it.

No post-cards were left for Dave at the end of the meeting.

August Public Meeting Minutes were compiled by Helen Blumer and Dave Blumer – Lake Education and Planning Services based on a tape recording of the event.

Respectfully submitted by Dave Blumer, September 8, 2017