

WATER

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Recreation versus safety a key issue



Frank Wiese The Morning Call

THE OLD ROAD to the Francis E. Walter Dam (at center left) used to flood when the reservoir rose 10 feet above the normal level. However, a new road (center right), which opened in spring 2005, allowed the dam to maintain a larger reservoir. New water storage plans were developed that helped facilitate a boost in recreation on the Lehigh.

could top the dam's spillway during heavy rains, such as those that moved through the area in late June. At the very least, flood-control advocates say, these changes have the potential to exacerbate the region's already serious flooding problem.

Although the Corps is still evaluating the program's effect on recreation and flood control, the changes are being praised by outdoor enthusiasts and tourism officials.

Today on the Lehigh, the Corps is conducting the dam's 26th and final whitewater release of the season, and commercial rafting companies are wrapping up their best season in a decade. Estimates from the Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau indicate whitewater rafting may have pumped nearly \$60 million into the local economy this year — tripling the impact of 2004, when just seven whitewater releases were held.

The popularity of Lehigh River trout fishing also is surging, with professional guides now charging upward of \$300 per day to escort anglers on the water. With additional flow management, the Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance, which has been the driving force behind plans to improve the fishery, predicts the river will provide year-round angling on par with the nationally renowned Upper Delaware River in New York, which pumps about \$30 million a year into that region's economy.

Robert Uguccioni, executive director of the Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau, said improved management of the Lehigh has enhanced the region's reputation as a natural playground.

"Outdoor recreation is the No. 1 reason people come here," said Uguccioni, whose agency promotes tourism in Carbon, Monroe, Pike and Wayne counties. "From our research, the traveler really wants an authentic experience. They don't want something that's been prefabricated. Going down the Lehigh River in a raft or catching a fish in the Lehigh River is very authentic."

Some whitewater and angling enthusiasts want even more water stored and released at the Francis E. Walter Dam next year, but Corps officials say they must strike a balance with flood control. "That's the reason the dam was built in the first place — after Hurricane Diane caused disastrous flooding in 1955 — and federal law requires flood control to take precedence over all else."

The important role the dam plays in reducing Lehigh Val-

ley flooding was highlighted in late June, when a stalled storm system dumped as much as 17 inches of rain in a week's time. More than 100 properties in Carbon and Lehigh counties were damaged, including 66 on Adam's Island in Allentown, which was partially submerged.

From June 26-29, the amount of water stored in the reservoir increased more than fivefold, from 5.6 billion gallons to 31.2 billion gallons, and the water level at the dam rose 79 feet. At its peak, the reservoir reached an all-time record 87 percent of its 35.8 billion-gallon capacity, with the water level just 8 feet below the spillway. A dam's spillway serves as a safety valve to prevent water from topping the dam itself. Corps officials say spillway flow is never desirable because whatever water goes over the spillway is uncontrolled release.

The Corps reported in July that the Francis E. Walter Dam in Kidder Township, along with the agency's other dams and levees in the Delaware River Basin, prevented \$45.8 million in damage to properties along the rivers during the June flood. Of the five federal flood-control dams in the Delaware Basin, the Kidder Township dam held the most water.

But George A. Sauls, a Corps engineer who oversees the dam, said the record water level raised concerns about whether the dam would have held if the storm had been worse.

"We were caught with our pool up ... and we were uncomfortable," Sauls said. "This year's storage [level], associated with this year's precipitation, got us closer to the spillway than I would have liked. It has caused me to pause and reconsider the risks associated with this higher pool."

Fears about flooding

Flood has become a four-letter word in the minds of many Lehigh Valley residents. June's event was the third major flood to hit the region in the past two years, leaving those who live along the Lehigh and Delaware rivers weary and looking for answers.

For Jack Capparell, that flood changed him from a supporter of increased storage at the dam into an opponent. Capparell, an avid Lehigh River trout angler, was not personally affected by the flood, but he fears the government may be putting fun ahead of flooding.

"I was for this 100 percent, but [now] I see the potential downside," said Capparell, of Hazleton. "If this storm would have stuck around an extra day ... there would have been a disaster in the Lehigh Valley."

Sauls, the Corps engineer, disputes that, noting that the reservoir crested with more than 4.5 billion gallons of unused capacity.

At the peak of the flooding on June 28, water was rushing into the reservoir at a rate of nearly 23,000 cubic feet per second but exiting the dam at 252 cubic feet per second, according to Corps data.

"Outflows were controlled, and releases were only made once the critical stages downstream started to recede," Sauls said. "Our release did not aggravate flooding anywhere downstream."

That said, Sauls acknowledged the storm's magnitude caught the agency off-guard. Had there been more warning, he said, dam operators would have released a large quantity of water to free up additional storage space before the rain began.

"Obviously, the closer you get to the spillway, the more concerned you get," he said.

Dean Druckenmiller, Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance president, said worrying about flood damage that might have occurred is a distraction from reality.

"The dam proved itself. It did what it was supposed to do," said Druckenmiller, a licensed fishing guide who runs drift-boat trips down the Lehigh. "I mean, they got 18 inches of rain up there. Tropical storms and hurricanes don't even dump that much when they blow through."

Robert A. Bachman, an alliance board member, said it would be unfortunate if recreational enhancements on the

Lehigh were sacrificed over fears of a flood that might never happen. Plans for improvements on the Lehigh are similar to what has been done for decades with flood-control dams elsewhere in the country, such as the White River in Arkansas.

"If the only concern is flood control, then the safe answer is, you don't raise the [reservoir] level at all," he said. But the dam "certainly has excess flood-control capacity, and some of that could be used for a cold-water fishery."

Regardless of the alliance's position, flood control is getting more public attention than it has in a long time.

Last month, the Delaware River Basin Commission announced a new flood-control plan that will prohibit New York City from maintaining its three reservoirs on the Upper Delaware River at more than 80 percent of capacity.

That plan was developed in response to complaints from hundreds of flood-stricken residents who live along the Delaware — including many from Northampton County. They contend New York's practice of keeping the reservoirs full worsened the June flood. Basin commission officials agree spillage from the reservoirs increased flooding in some areas but said the impact wasn't felt as far downstream as the Lehigh Valley.

"The recent floods have given everybody firsthand

experience in the misery of a large flood and what people go through," said Richard Fromuth, head of the basin commission's operations department.

Fromuth said the Delaware basin commission supports the experimental flow program at the Francis E. Walter Dam, largely because it uses a relatively small portion of flood control capacity. If the Corps wants to significantly increase the reservoir's water level in future years, Fromuth said, the basin commission would review the plan to make sure the scenario that occurred this year on the Upper Delaware is not repeated.

"We're very interested in multiple uses of a reservoir when it's possible," he said. "But at the same time, we don't want to see flood control compromised, because it's precious to people along the river."

The Corps is preparing for a 2007 storage plan similar to this year's, although it won't be finalized until the Corps consults with other agencies.

Capparell said he doesn't object to using dams for recreation, as long as the desire to maximize tourism dollars is offset by the duty to minimize flood damage.

"They say it's going to bring a lot of money in, but the possibility exists to take a lot of money out of people's

