

Fishing accord protest largely fizzles

Organizer says turnout smaller than he anticipated

One of the main organizers of a protest Friday against the province's new commercial fishing agreement with Saugeen Ojibway Nation said he figured more people would have showed up for the event.

There has been a lot of talk about the five-year deal, said Michael Hutt, and more than 1,000 signatures have been collected on a petition that calls for it to be repealed.

"Everybody complains, complains, complains, so I figured, have a gathering to show your support (for the sports fishery). But there's a lot of people that I think are afraid to show up," he said in an interview at the westside boat launch.

Hutt said the protest was against the government of Ontario, not native commercial anglers.

About 80 people attended the event, which was held the day the controversial agreement took effect. Several police officers, including some in a police boat, were on hand to watch.

Most people stood and chatted on the harbour wall. No one held placards or chanted slogans.

About six recreational fishing boats fitted with Canadian flags were launched at the start of the protest.

Hutt said he is concerned about the "future of fishing" and the safety of anglers on the water because of gill nets now that the agreement states commercial fishing can run year round in Owen Sound and Colpoys Bay.

He said he is also upset with the provincial government for not consulting with local sports fishing groups before the deal was signed.

"It feels like the agreement was done up and no one was told about it," he said.

Dave Fidler, a recreational fisherman for about 50 years, said he doesn't think the entire agreement should be repealed. Commercial fishing, however, should be banned from Owen Sound and Colpoys.

"I have concerns about what these gill nets will do to the fish," he said.

Arnie Clark, an avid angler, said he would like the two bays declared "sanctuary waters" where sports fishing is allowed but not commercial fishing.

He said he would like the agreement repealed and a new one negotiated in consultation with the sports fishing community.

The International Joint Commission has gone against its study group recommendation and called for an investigation of ways to restore water levels in Lakes Michigan and Huron and in Georgian Bay through fixing erosion in the St. Clair River.

The commission's final report recommends consideration of installing sills in the riverbed, which was last disturbed by dredging in the 1960s, to prevent the increased outflows. The commission estimates slowing the flow could increase lake levels by 13 to 25 centimetres.

"Although future water level are uncertain, we cannot ignore the damage from record low water levels," said Joe Comuzzi, Canadian chair of the commission. "From Georgian Bay to Door County, from shoreline property owners to the shipping industry, we heard calls for action, and we urge governments to act in response to our recommendations."

Lots of study would be required, including an environmental assessment, engineering work and a comprehensive costbenefit analysis — as well as funding from the Canadian and United States governments — and that process could take five or more likely 10 years, IJC spokesman John Nevin said Friday.

The IJC regulates lake control structures where they exist on the Great Lakes and is responsible for the Boundary Waters Treaty, a water quality and quantity dispute resolution process.

Water levels hit historical lows in the Michigan- Huron basin earlier this year but they've recovered somewhat with a much wetter than usual April. Currently Michigan- Huron is 175.88 metres above sea level, which is still 55 centimetres below the long-term average for this time of year going back to 1910, Nevin said.

The latest implication of low lake levels was this week's announcement that the ChiCheemaun ferry's sailing season may be delayed until the bumpers are lowered at the South Bay Mouth on Manitoulin Island.

Mary Muter, of Sierra Club Ontario, said Friday: "We don't need to study this for five more years. It's obvious that the St. Clair riverbed is eroding. It needs to be stabilized and then some structures need to be put in place so that the water levels can be restored gradually and responsibly." Muter said Michigan-Huron levels have been below the longterm average for 14 years. When the lake level falls below about 176 metres above

sea level, lake freighters have to lighten their loads and boaters generally need to be more careful, she said.

Muter said that among the Great Lakes, only the Huron-Michigan basin level has been on a downward trend since measurements began in the early 1900s. She said once the outflows are stabilized, the lakes can store more water during wetter times instead of continuing to lose water at an increasing rate.

The cost to install sills in the St. Clair River is estimated at between \$100 million and \$200 million. She noted Georgian Bay mayors have estimated low water levels have cost them \$500 million in one year alone. The costs around Huron and Michigan would be even greater, she said.

"You know, it's not rocket science to say let's do this . . . the work would have to be spread out over several years. The sills would have to be installed gradually because you absolutely want to minimize or eliminate downstream impacts."

Muter is also vice-chair of Restore Our Water International, a collection of cottager and ratepayer groups which, under other monikers, successfully lobbied for the St. Clair issue to be investigated. That took five years and the study group concluded not to recommend work to slow the flow.

Last year's final International Upper Great Lakes Study Group report, "Lake Superior Regulation: Addressing Uncertainty in Upper Great Lakes Water Levels," found the lakes rise and fall, but over the past 100 years overall they have gone down. Changing weather patterns and the gradual tilting of the lake floors as they rebound from glaciation are the main culprits for the drop of about 23 cm between 1963 and 2006, it said.

Muter noted sills or speed bumps on the floor of the St. Clair River were approved by both governments after dredging in the 1960s but "bickering" from the Canadian government caused the project to be shelved.

Nevin, the IJC spokesman, said there had been a plan to install sills but said there was no pressing need to put them in as water levels continued to rise through to the 1990s. "So it's not really anybody's fault, it's just that the levels were high so they thought we have a lot of other priorities. Why should we try to compensate for dredging when levels were high because that would make the problem worse when levels were high."

The IJC report given to both governments before Friday's public release, was not signed by the commission's United States chair, Lana Pollack, though two U.S. commissioners did sign. Pollack found the report places "insufficient emphasis on climate change and the need for governments to pursue and fund adaptive management strategies in the basin," a release accompanying the report said.

Pollack also feared raising "false hope" among those suffering from low water levels, while possibly disrupting people downriver.

Adaptive strategies require ongoing funding to study lake evaporation and mapping of the riverbed, Nevin said. The commission also recommended a comprehensive monitoring program paid for by both governments.

Dick Hibma, a former member of a public liaison group which advised people studying the lower water levels of Upper Great Lakes, helped fine-tune a recommendation to take a monitoring and management approach instead of more interventionist action.

But the former Owen Sound city councillor and current Grey Sauble Conservation Authority chair said Friday the study group left a "back door" opportunity to consider putting barriers in the St. Clair River. If it was tied to financing of a robust adaptive management plan — mostly a more detailed gathering of data to better understand the lakes — then the costs and feasibility of installing something in the river could be considered.

In light of the "astronomical" costs of significantly lower lake levels, Hibma added, that information will be needed to make the very political decision whether to do work in the river.