

THREE LAKES COUNCIL

**Background Report and Plan
Regarding Beaver Activity in Our Lakes**

Adopted by the Board of Directors

March 29, 2012

BACKGROUND

History and Nature of Problems

Although there have been occasional reports of transient beavers in our lakes for a number of years, the fall of 2009 was the first time residents reported ongoing beaver activity. A lodge (beaver residence) was constructed on the shore of Lake Oscaleta across from the Two Lakes Club beach and in 2011 was replaced by a larger lodge. During the spring, summer, and fall of 2011, the beavers started damming (with branches, sticks and some mud arranged in a strong, but not entirely solid structure) the east entrance to the culvert that runs below Oscaleta Road.

Informal, occasional volunteer attempts to dismantle the dam met with only short-term successes, because the beavers repaired it each time.

No one knows how many beavers reside on our lakes at this point. Only two have been sighted at any one time, but it is likely that there is a mating pair and possibly a family.

There have been several reports regarding the beaver activity so far in 2012. We have had news of the loss of more trees as well as damming activity at the culvert under Twin Lakes Road in the channel connecting Lakes Rippowam and Oscaleta.

The damming activity in 2011 resulted in three problems:

- Obstructed canoe and kayak passage between Lake Oscaleta and Lake Waccabuc whenever damming occurred. This also presented a potentially dangerous situation.
- Water levels rose as a result of the damming and heavy rainfall last summer and fall, raising concern about flooding on some properties.
- Loss of trees – willows, birch, pussy willows. This occurred on residents' properties, on the preserve land at the west end of Oscaleta, and along the channel.

Two other issues were raised and discussed, both of which are rare:

1. Possible water contamination – the USDA advises that all wild animals (including beavers) that live and defecate in water can spread microorganisms that pose a threat to human health through intestinal-tract problems such as Giardia. This is a minor consideration, as people are protected with normal hygiene practices.
2. Attacks on people and pets – there are some, but very few reported incidents. Like other wild animals, beavers generally avoid people but may react with aggression when cornered or to protect their young.

The Formulation of a Taskforce

In February 2012, the Three Lakes Council Board of Directors created a small taskforce to gather information and present recommendations to the Board. The Taskforce reported back to the Board on March 29, after talking to the various interested parties and other knowledgeable people. The taskforce members were David Eggers, Rick Ferrarone, Peter Gross (Chair), Joe Tansey and Phil Wick, and other members of the community, especially Jan Andersen and Paul Lewis who assisted in gathering information and providing contacts.

Information Compiled

In addition to the Three Lakes Council and residents of the community, members of the Taskforce and/or Board discussed the situation and possible solutions with the following:

- Town of Lewisboro Highway Department, which has an interest in keeping the culvert clear, at least if obstructions might result in flooding the road. The Town does not own the culvert or the land on the sides of the road, but has a right-of-way easement that encompasses access for that purpose. Members of the Taskforce met with or had telephone conversations with Highway Superintendent, Peter Ripperger.
 - Position: Peter Ripperger agreed to cooperate with us, within his already stretched resources. Unless the damming activities threaten to flood the road, he did not think he could justify extensive Town involvement, but if we were to provide better access for a backhoe, he would have his department clear out the culvert a few times a year. If we were to place branches and debris at the side of the road near the culvert, he would have his department pick them up. He agreed to help obtain any dam-disturbance permits and/or trapping permits in the name of the town. We had no discussions with him about the reported damming activities in the Rippowam-Oscaleta channel; we expect he'd be willing to have his department pick up branches and debris from the side of Twin Lakes Road at the culvert. He also said that because of the standpipe hydrant at the culvert, approval of the Fire Department should be obtained prior to any back-hoeing.
- New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, which is the granting authority for permits required to disturb a beaver dam and permits needed for trapping during closed season, which this year begins on April 8. These permits are easily obtainable to deal with "nuisance beavers," a designation which, according to the DEC, applies to ours because it blocks a road culvert. We reviewed the laws and regulations, and had conversations with Tom Riffaldi at the Regional Office based in New Paltz.
 - Position: Tom Riffaldi discussed various alternatives, but recommended we have the beavers trapped as the most viable (although probably temporary) solution. He said he would assist in the process of getting required DEC permits and also advised that transport of live beavers would not be permitted under NYS law.
- Wildlife Preserves, a nonprofit land-trust organization based in New Jersey that owns the land around the entrance to the channel, as well as the land on both sides of the channel up to where it flows into the culvert under Oscaleta Road. We had discussions with Robert Perkins, President, and hosted a site visit by Len Fariello, Land Manager.

◦ Position: Robert Perkins said that the strong preference of the organization is not to trap the beavers, but said he'd be willing to discuss it.

- United States Department of Agriculture, Hudson Valley Regional Office, which has no direct interest, but has become heavily involved in dealing with beaver problems, both as a source of information and advice and as an entity that can do trapping. We talked at length to Ken Pruesser at the Hudson Valley Regional Office, who said he would be glad to schedule a free consultation/site visit in the next few weeks.

◦ Position: Ken Pruesser favors trapping as the best solution for our situation. He said USDA could do the trapping if we wanted. He thinks that if done at the culvert, the trapping could be done under the authority of the Town's road easement, even without authorization from Wildlife Preserves. He also advised that transporting of live beavers, wither in-state or out-of-state, is not permitted.

- Ecologic, the consulting group that did a Lewisboro town-wide lake study about five years ago.

◦ Position: Calling the beavers here an unfortunate development, they said the beavers "can do enormous damage to the riparian vegetation and will hamper your efforts to manage the lake levels and watershed disturbance. While unpopular, trapping and removal is your most viable option at this point."

- Various Private Wildlife-Control Companies, all of whom do commercial trapping and naturally recommended it. These included Westchester Wildlife, where we talked with Jim Dryesacker, head of the company; Wildlife Busters, where we talked with Ben Munger, head of the company; and our neighbor, Justin Sutera, who can arrange to do the trapping with a colleague who is licensed.

- Fencing Companies, to get estimates on the cost of putting a new gate into the chain link fence, to allow the Town's backhoe access to the entrance to the culvert.

- Other People Who Have Faced Similar Issues, which included Phil Wick's brother, who manages a large tract in northern Connecticut for Yale University and has had significant problems with beavers there, and friends of Peter Gross who live on a lake in Canada where they also have problems with beavers. In all cases, they said that trapping the beavers was the only practical solution, despite the fact that it is likely to be a temporary one.

It is worthy of noting that outside experts who have experience with beaver colonization advise that trapping is the best solution for our situation and that without it, the situation will almost certainly worsen. No one that we contacted advised that we should try to manage the situation without trapping because it will likely get worse.

Consideration of Other Devices, Such as a "Pond Leveler"

One topic that was discussed with a number of people is the use of a "pond leveler," which is a tube made out of a material that looks like reinforced chicken wire and runs from before the dam to a place after the dam. The principle is that even if the beavers attempt to dam it, the water will still flow, so the dam won't work, and no flooding would occur. Everyone agreed that this is not a feasible solution for us because it would block canoe and kayak passage.

- A variation on this approach would be to install two smaller (10") culverts at the sides of the main culvert, either at or below surface level. This approach would have to insure continuous water flow as well as boat passage if we decide to implement it.

A related concern with the use of pond levelers is that this might result in the beavers' choosing another dam site in the channel, which would be harder for us to get to and where we wouldn't have the Town's roadway easement as a legal basis for removing the dams.

THE PLAN

The Board considered two basic options. One was trying to manage the situation without trapping, and the other was trapping. In light of the New York State law, trapping involves killing the beavers since they cannot be transported live.

The Board's decision was to adopt a plan that begins with an attempt to manage the current situation, but that calls for trapping if those efforts are not successful.

- Managing the situation without trapping
 - A volunteer committee of residents will be organized. It will be responsible for clearing out any beaver damming of the channels on a regular basis and moving the debris to the side of the road above the culvert involved. Interested volunteers should contact Joe Tansey, who will organize a work schedule.
 - All residents who kayak or canoe through the channels will be asked to help by pulling out sticks and debris they encounter at dam sites and putting the sticks and debris on the side of the channel or on the side of the road.
 - The Town's Highway Department will pick up sticks and debris left on the side of the roads.
 - At a cost of approximately \$1,000, the Three Lakes Council will have a 10' gate installed in the chain-link fence along the east side of Oscaleta Road above the culvert, which will allow the Town's Highway Department to use a backhoe to clear out the dam site if and when necessary.
 - The Three Lakes Council will publish information and/or links on its website regarding the steps landowners can take to protect their trees from beaver damage.

- Water levels on all three lakes will continue to be monitored closely.
- If possible, small “pond levelers” will be installed along the sides of the culverts.

- Criteria for success of failure

The activities described above will continue for as long as they are successful. Attempts to manage the situation without trapping will be deemed unsuccessful if one or more of the following occurs:

- We don't get a sufficient number of volunteers to keep the channels clear;
- If damming occurs and the water level in Oscaleta is 6" or more above the level of Waccabuc, or the water level in Rippowam is 6" or more above the level of Oscaleta;
- The occurrence of any unprovoked injury by a beaver;
- If there is attempted dam-building at a location in the Oscaleta-Waccabuc channel that is not at the culvert and removal is deemed unworkable;
- If damming activity blocks free passage of canoes and kayaks between Rippowam and Oscaleta, or between Oscaleta and Waccabuc for two consecutive weekends; or
- In the judgment of the Board, the beavers are causing other significant changes that are likely to have a negative long-term effect on the lake ecosystem or lakeside environment.

- Trapping

If the management efforts are unsuccessful (per the criteria listed above), the trapping of beavers will be carried out under authority of the Town's easement to keep the culverts clear.

- A trapper will be selected and asked to conduct the trapping. This is expected to cost between a few hundred dollars and \$3,000, depending on the number of beavers taken.
- The meat of the beavers will be donated to the Wolf Conservation Center.
- If we have the permission of Wildlife Preserves (the landowner) or other legal authority, the lodge will be destroyed so as not to encourage the rapid re-colonization of the lakes.

SUMMARY

This is a sad and difficult situation. No one on the Board feels comfortable about trapping the beavers, and no one feels comfortable about allowing the effects of damming to have a really adverse impact on our lakes and properties.

The decision to attempt to manage the problem without trapping the beavers comes from the conviction that we should try to live in harmony with nature whenever possible and not destroy the lives of other animals because of manageable problems.

The decision to set specific criteria and be prepared to move on to trapping of the situation cannot be managed successfully comes from respecting the expert advice we received and concern about the long-term and short-term effects of beaver colonization of our lakes.