

Locals pour cold water on proposed Osoyoos Lake levels



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Mother Nature doesn't care about cross-border water agreements, the committee that governs Osoyoos Lake levels was told during public hearings this week.

That much is clear right now, with the lake level higher than it should be according to the operating orders administered by the International Osoyoos Lake Board of Control.

The 25-year term of those orders expires in February, and the board is seeking public input on adjustments it's recommending to those orders ahead of their renewal by the International Joint Commission responsible for cross-border water issues.

The proposed orders would allow "to the extent possible" for a new summer maximum of 912.5 feet above sea level, versus the 911.5 allowed today.

That level is managed by the Zosel Dam downstream of the lake. Since May, the floodgates have been wide open and the lake level in Mother Nature's control. As of Thursday morning, the lake was at 912.8 feet.

"This isn't a controlled situation we're in," Osoyoos Mayor Stu Wells told the IJC on Wednesday.

"I hope people understand there's not a lot of play available."

Wells was one of nine people to speak at the Osoyoos hearing, where most agreed the proposed level is too high.

Garry Ford, who spoke on behalf of the local sailing club, said at-risk plant species shouldn't be overlooked.

"Every foot that we raise the lake, we lose about... six feet of habitat for those plants," Ford said.

Others spoke about flooding problems and property damage caused by a high lake, and the issues it causes for boat owners.

The proposed orders, crafted by Washington state, the dam owner, would also maintain the winter minimum level at 909 feet but allow more gradual seasonal transitions, and kill a second set of levels that is permitted in drought years.

Prior to the proposed orders being made public this month, it was feared by some that Washington would ask for guaranteed flow from Canada ostensibly to protect fish downstream. Such a guarantee could impact B.C.'s ability to manage its water.

Okanagan Basin Water Board executive director Anna Warwick Sears told the hearing she was "in no way" recommending guaranteed flows, but wanted the agreement's preamble to include an acknowledgment of the "shared values of fisheries and environmental resources" on both sides of the border.

Also of concern for Wells is the indefinite duration of the proposed agreement, an outline of which did not specify terms to reopen the agreement.

About 60 people turned out for the hearing in Osoyoos. IJC commissioner Lyall D. Knott estimated 20 to 25 people attended Tuesday's event in Oroville, Wash., where similar concerns were heard.

"By and large I'd say (the public) was supportive" of the proposal, Knott said, although commissioners understand the issues raised and will "give them due consideration."

Knott said a final decision is expected sometime this fall.

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