

Thousand Islands Sun

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International Joint Commission tours river to view water level

By Pamela McDowell, Staff Writer

Clayton – Three commissioners of the International Joint Commission (IJC) and three members of the International Lake Ontario-St. Lawrence River Board of Control toured a section of the St. Lawrence River aboard Jeff Garnsey's Fin and Feather to view the water level and impacts of this year's high water.

Following the tour, they met for a conference at the Save The River offices on Riverside Drive where their message was clear: It is Mother Nature that

caused the high water, not Water Level Plan 2014, and they stand behind the water level regulations.

"No plan could prevent this," explained the commission's chair, Pierre Béland.

"There has been so much snowmelt and rain, there is more water entering Lake Ontario than can go out. If you add in all the streams and rivers emptying into the lake, it becomes an exceptional event that no plan can prevent."

His comments were in response to criticism of the IJC's implementation of Plan 2014 and calls by some stakeholders affected by high water to do away with the water level management plan, perhaps reverting to Plan 1958D.

"Let's focus on how to deal with this, rather than accuse the IJC, which cannot control record highs on Lake Erie. Let's focus on resiliency," he suggested.

He said members of the IJC are traveling to all the Great Lakes to seek solutions of how to live with the high water, not work against it.

Jim Howe, executive director of the Nature Conservancy of Central and Western New York, said high-water cycles are a regular occurrence, and this high-water cycle happened to coincide with the implementation of Plan 2014, giving the impression that the plan is at fault.

Jane Corwin, the U.S. Section Chair of the IJC, remarked that historically, the Great Lakes flood every 20 years. She said she understands that some homeowners are hurting, since this is the second high-water event in three years, and the challenge is how to handle a short-term problem with long-term results.

"A healthy lake and ecosystem in the river is what we're here for."

Mrs. Corwin said the IJC should look at the Great Lakes Adaptive Management Plan and conduct an evaluation to be sure Plan 2014 is working the way it was meant to.

"At this flood level, the IJC has the authority to do everything they can to get good results," she said.

The IJC is faced with a balancing act. It has ordered International Lake Ontario-St. Lawrence River Board to manage the highest outflow through the Moses-Saunders Power Dam in Massena to relieve some of the flooding, but more water is entering from Lake Ontario, due to precipitation in the Great Lakes basin, than can exit. High outflows have caused severe flooding downriver in Montreal, Que., Canada.

Jefferson County Legislator Philip Reed observed that there is a perception that the IJC "can flip a switch" and lower the level of the Great Lakes. He has heard people say this high water has never happened before, yet having grown up on the St. Lawrence River, he has witnessed several years of high water.

Eric Mower, a longtime supporter of Save The River, commented in part, "The mob is forming; emotions are high."

Mr. Mower suggests better informing the public so people understand the intricacies of the overall situation and the water-management plan.

Nearly all the speakers expressed their perspective that since nature, not a water management plan, has caused the flooding, municipalities, businesses and residents should implement measures to make their waterfront assets more resilient to water fluctuations.

Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, who attended the meeting via teleconference, said she supports Plan 2014, and she invited the IJC members to meet with her in Washington, D.C.

Save The River Executive Director John Peach hosted the June 28 meeting, and he remarked, in part, "We recognize that residents of Lake Ontario are suffering the ill effects of the extraordinary snowmelt and rainfall of 2019, just as they did in 2017. But please remember that we on the St. Lawrence River are suffering equally. Many of our businesses are underwater. Those businesses must face the added burden of lost sales in what is always a short season at best. Many of our residential properties are underwater. Homeowners are contemplating making the same repairs they made in 2017. The river is suffering. Tourism is down. Spending is down. Housing sales are depressed. And yet, the river community supports plan 2014."

He suggested that the IJC present a model of how the lake and river levels would have fared under 1958D.

"We ask that the Commissioners have their technical staff run a simulation of 2019's conditions using the criteria of Plan 1958D and make the results of the simulation available for public review," he said.



Members of the IJC and International Lake Ontario - St. Lawrence River Board explain that water-level management Plan 2014 is based on science. They are touring the Great Lakes region to speak with residents about the high water levels throughout the Great Lakes and how the IJC mitigates them. Pictured from left are Tony David, member of the International Board; Pierre Béland, chair of the IJC; and Jane Corwin, IJC U.S. section chair.

Pamela McDowell photo



Local leaders of the International Joint Commission (IJC) return from a tour of the St. Lawrence River, where they viewed the water level, as well as wildlife spawning and breeding areas. Pictured at far right is Jefferson County Legislator Philip Reed, who is conversing with Pierre Béland, chair of the IJC.