

# Lake Levels Report

May 2020

The most recent dramatic event in the Muskoka Watershed occurred in the spring of 2019, and involved severe flooding of shoreline properties in many districts and hardship in many areas, especially in the communities of Bracebridge and Huntsville. Fortunately, the adverse effects on Kawagama and Bear lakes were somewhat limited. Minden and other communities in the Trent-Severn Waterways were also affected.

In response to the above, the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry appointed as a Special Advisor on Flooding, Douglas McNeil of McNeil Consulting Inc. in Winnipeg, to make recommendations to improve the existing flood policy framework. Following an extensive review, including attending a number of regional meetings, Mr. McNeil deposited his 157-page report on October 2019. There were 66 recommendations. It was an impressive piece of work. Would the report gather dust or would it see the light of day? On March 10, 2020, in Minden, Minister Yakabuski, at a meeting regarding flooding, made reference to the Report and so he had at least read it!

Several of the Report's observations should be of interest to Kawagama and Bear Lake residents.

- The flooding was caused by a number of severe environmental events. The MNRF was not found to be negligent in any way.
- The dams in the Muskoka Watershed were not designed and cannot serve as flood control structures.
- Even if the dams could serve as flood control structures, no lake or reservoir capacity is available to accommodate flood waters. This is a very important observation for our two lakes, and counters the repeated demands of some Muskoka communities over the years, to restrict flow from the upper reaches of the watershed in times of spring flooding.
- Historically the large lakes in the watershed, were designated as navigation lakes and their lake levels were managed in order to minimise lake level fluctuation. The same could not be said of Kawagama and Bear lakes. Prior to 2006, Kawagama targeted levels were a low of 353.8m to a high of 355.8m, a difference of 2 meters or 6.5 ft! Post 2006 the targeted fluctuation was reduced to 1 meter. In the past, with minimal water level fluctuation in the large lakes, the elaborate boathouses were designed and built with this in mind. The recent flooding and ice damage has certainly changed the outlook for these structures.

- Although floodplain mapping had been carried out many years ago, the pressure to develop shoreline structures was such that some municipalities permitted extensive development in floodplain areas, resulting in significant flooding and property damage recently. Fortunately, the topography of the shoreline in our lakes means that floodplains here are few and far between.

### **KLCA / MNRF Relations**

On March 20<sup>th</sup>, a meeting was held with a Water Management Specialist, at the MNRF offices in Bracebridge. An annual face to face meeting with the MNRF is felt to be important in order to remind them where we are, and that we monitor lake levels closely.

The management of the dam here in the spring of 2019, was instrumental in our lakes escaping the brunt of the flooding. The torrent of water released down the Hollow River during the flooding was something to experience. The MNRF approach to the handling of the watershed challenges, in March and April, has undergone a significant change. When the Muskoka River Water Management Plan (MRWMP) was adopted in 2006 it stipulated that March 15<sup>th</sup> would be the start date to begin to “fill” the lakes. The KLCA endorsed the change because it reduced the spring water level fluctuation for our lake to only one meter, and it was predicted that it would prevent the lake trout fry from being left high and dry in some locations, thus possibly increasing the lake trout population.

Given over 10 years of experience in the implementation of the March 15<sup>th</sup> start date, the results have been less than satisfactory. Studies of the Kawagama Lake trout population over the years, has not shown any significant increase in numbers. The massive rains in March of 2013, resulted in a request that Muskoka lake levels be reduced in March to the bottom of the Normal Operating Zone, in order to minimize flooding in that area. In response, and following a review by the MNRF, it was recognized that having a fixed date of March 15<sup>th</sup> for the whole watershed just wasn't manageable. Climatic conditions vary from year to year, and with wide differences in snow pack amounts and water content, combined with widely different temperatures at that time of the year, the “fill” dates had to vary from year to year. The result is that the start of the “fill” is totally dependent on the climate and not on the placement of logs in the dams. For Kawagama, the 2019 start date was April 8<sup>th</sup>. For 2020 the start date was March 9<sup>th</sup>.

## **MRWMP Amendments**

When the Plan was adopted in 2006, it was set to expire in 2016. It was hoped that all stakeholders which includes the KLCA would have an opportunity to report on their experiences, both positive and negative. This didn't happen and the government, in a Technical Bulletin, made it clear that wide public consultation would not take place. A detailed, expensive and complex formula for requesting amendments was laid out. When the MNRF was asked if there is interest in amending the Plan, the reply was that there is all kinds of interest, from the population, stakeholders and municipalities, however little if anything has been accomplished. The process is very complex and expensive. A KLCA request for amendments is almost out of the question, given the cost, the effort and the difficulty in developing widespread consensus in our community. Hopefully in the future, all stakeholders will be given the opportunity to advance suggestions for change.

Eric Millar

Chair of the KLCA Committee on Lake Levels