
WHAT WE HEARD

INTERNATIONAL RAINY-LAKE OF THE WOODS WATERSHED BOARD

VIRTUAL PUBLIC MEETING

OCTOBER 2, 2020

On October 2, 2020 at 12:45pm Central Time, the International Rainy-Lake of the Woods Watershed Board held their annual meeting with the public. This meeting fulfills the Board's Directive (April 1st 2013) paragraph 4. k) that the Board's duties shall be to "Meet publicly at least once a year with invitations to First Nations, Métis, and Native Americans and all water users groups and stakeholders." It provides a valuable opportunity for the Board to hear from those who reside in or frequent the basin and for the Board to inform the public about activities and work being undertaken.

The COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions and other public health recommendations have had an impact on Board operations including the ability to host an in-person public meeting this year. The IRLWWB public meeting was therefore held virtually using Zoom with facilitation and technical support from Stratos Consulting in Ottawa.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

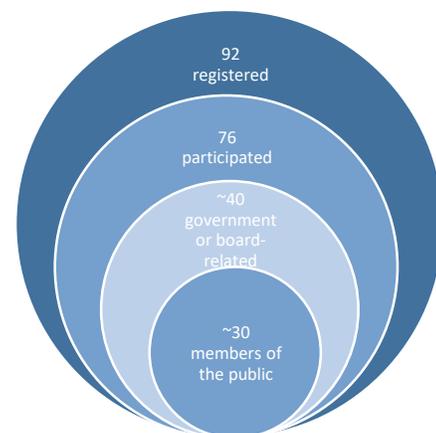
The IRLWWB Secretariat and the IJC Communication team worked together to get the announcement for the meeting posted on IJC main website, the IRLWWB IJC webpage and in the events calendars online. The press release was sent to 40+ journalists in the basin and the meeting link was shared by the IJC on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, with additional promotions targeted to social media in the basin. In addition, the announcement was promoted via Grand Council Treaty #3's Facebook Page, Lake of the Woods Water Sustainability Foundation Webpage and their distribution lists.

To reach more participants and given the Board is now more familiar with the process for running a virtual public meeting getting the word out further in advance is advised.

PARTICIPATION

Participants were asked to register via Eventbrite to receive the virtual meeting information and an advance copy of the presentation. Registrants were also invited to submit questions in advance for the Board.

For the first virtual public meeting the participation was relatively good. 76 participants is less than would have been seen during the time when the rule curves were being updated and the water quality plan of study was being developed, but represents a reasonable attendance given the circumstances.



The exact number of participants from the public was challenging to discern based on the technology used. This may be something to consider for future meetings if more precise numbers are desired.

A clear implementation plan for a virtual meeting with the communications approach and suggested timelines could be developed well in advance with the goal of increasing participation.

PRESENTATION

IRLWWB Co-Chair Mike Goffin chaired and presented an intro and overview of the IJC and the Board. Committee and Advisory Group Co-Chairs and the International Watershed Coordinator provided updates on Board activities. The agenda and key information shared with the public are provided below.

Agenda	
1. Welcome, Introductions, Review of Agenda	Mike Goffin
2. Recognizing the Right Honourable John Turner	Todd Sellers
3. Virtual Housekeeping	Barb Sweazey
4. Intro to the IJC and the IRLWWB	Mike Goffin
5. Board Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water Levels Committee • Aquatic Ecosystem Health Committee • Adaptive Management Committee 	Scott Jutila Todd Sellers Teika Newton
6. Questions for the Board and Discussion	Facilitated by Barb Sweazey
7. Board Activities Continued <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement Committee • Community Advisory Group • Industry Advisory Group 	Kelly Sjerven Doug Franchot Mike Hirst
8. International Watershed Coordinator	Kelli Saunders
9. Questions for the Board and Discussion	Facilitated by Barb Sweazey
10. Closing remarks from the IRLWWB Co-Chairs and Adjournment	Mike Goffin

Water Levels Committee

- Co-Chairs: Erika Klyszejko and COL Karl Jansen. Presentation by Engineering Advisor, Scott Jutila.
- On March 6, 2020 after consulting with stakeholder representatives, the WLC committee decided to operate within the normal rule curves.
- Dry conditions have persisted in the basin. To date, water levels for both lakes remained within the rule curves and are currently in the lower half of the band.
- The committee is working on development of a communications protocol with U.S. and Canadian Forecast agencies to improve notification and communication of flow changes at the International Falls Dams
- Operational Guidelines which outline best practices for maintaining water levels within the Rule Curve is a living document which is posted on the IJC website and is periodically updated. The National Research Council Canada (NRC) is finalizing a report titled “Numerical Modelling Investigation of Low-Water Levels at the PCA Mill Intake, Upper Rainy River.” Recommendations

from the NRC report on the PCA intake presents an out-of-cycle revision opportunity. The WLC will coordinate proposed changes with the operators following receipt of the final report and aims to seek approval of updated Operational Guidelines by the end of this calendar year.

- Formation of a Flood Forecast Advisory Group has stalled since a workshop in 2018. The WLC will reinvigorate this effort by reaching out to the workshop participants this fall and developing a proposed path forward. A stretch goal is to have a functioning advisory group in place ahead of the 2021 freshet.
- The WLC will prepare a scope for a Review of Data Sources to Support Inflow Forecasting within the next 1-2 months that will guide a study effort that identifies gaps in forecasting data points or opportunities for improvement.
- The WLC will collaborate with the Adaptive Management Committee regarding bank erosion in the International Falls neighborhood of Shorewood Drive. Among the several variables involved, rapid water level changes may influence the situation which may threaten private residences in the future.

Aquatic Ecosystem Health Committee

- Co-Chairs: Todd Sellers and Mike Hirst. Presentation by Todd Sellers.
- Phase 1 of the Objectives & Alert Levels Project that began in 2018 has been completed. Alert levels for a reduced list of routinely monitored substance has been established.
- Phase 2 is underway. The purpose is to develop and reach consensus on the numbers or indicators for the Objectives and Alert Level needs proposed.
- The AEHC is working with the International Multi-Agency Arrangement Working Group on a project to identify and prioritize the species of highest risk to the basin.
- Proposals for Wild Rive Mapping and a new State of the Basin report will be submitted to the IJC's for International Watershed Initiative funding this fall.

Adaptive Management Committee

- Co-Chairs: Teika Newton and Ryan Maki. Presentation by Teika Newton.
- Based on a 2017 recommendation to order from the IJC, the directive for this new Committee was approved by the IJC Commissioners in September 2019. Committee members were formally appointed this spring.
- The AMC is focused on developing its first year work plan. Expected activities will include: considering information that describes how the 2018 rule curve changes affect water levels and flows in the Rainy and Namakan system, including how various interests are impacted; making recommendations for modifications to the rule curves to address more current knowledge and/or changed conditions of the system; and overseeing the Board's implementation of the IJC climate change guidance framework.

Engagement Committee

- Co-Chairs: Kelly Sjerven and Canadian vacancy. Presented by Canadian Secretary to the Board, Wellsley Hamilton.
- The Engagement Committee involves the public in water quality and quantity issues specific to the transboundary watershed.
- Committee activities include: Updates to the Board’s content on the IJC web site; Sharing information and contributing to activities of the Board such as: input to Terms of Reference for the Adaptive Management Committee, and public engagement for the Objectives and Alerts Project; and Ongoing work on Project WET, an IJC IWI-funded project focusing on development of a curriculum for International Falls Minnesota students to complement the existing Ontario curriculum.

Industry Advisory Group

- Co-chairs: Mike Hirst and Greg Chapman. Presentation by Mike Hirst.
- The Industry Advisory Group helps the board to be aware of industry perspectives on both sides of the United States-Canada border.
- Membership is diverse and open to any industry operating in the watershed. Recent members have represented these sectors: hydroelectric power, agriculture, forestry-related, fisheries, mining, and recreation and tourism.
- Those who are interested in joining the IAG are encouraged to contact the Co-chairs.

Community Advisory Group

- Co-chairs: Doug Franchot and Matt Myers. Presentation by Doug Franchot.
- The CAG stays apprised of water quality and quantity issues and events in the basin, raising issues and questions to the Board, and receiving updates from other committees and the Watershed Coordinator.
- The new Co-chairs of the CAG were appointed in June 2020 and held their first meeting in August.
- Recent topics of interest included: Objectives and Alerts project, zebra mussels, water levels, mining and the new Adaptive Management Committee
- Those who are interested in joining the CAG are encouraged to contact the Co-chairs. There is particular interest in finding a CAG member who is knowledgeable and engaged in the Baudette area in the US.

International Watershed Coordination Program

- The International Watershed Coordination Program is run by the Lake of the Woods Water Sustainability Foundation in partnership with the IJC, ECCC, MPCA and Koochiching SWCD
- The Program is in its 9th year, and continues to support special projects of the IJC. Recent projects have included establishment of the Adaptive Management Committee and project management for Phase I of the Objectives and Alerts review project.
- The International Watershed Coordinator continues to support the International Multi-Agency Arrangement groups and subcommittees, mainly by offering secretariat support and communication as priority projects move forward.
- The Coordinator continues to plan and implement civic engagement activities like the annual Civic Engagement Workshop and Binational Lake Associations Event, regular articles in the Kenora newspaper, updates to the watershed website showcasing local stewardship stories and initiatives and this summer, the Ask An Expert webinar series featuring 7 webinars at which experts on water-related issues made weekly lunchtime presentations to the public.



QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Two opportunities for questions from the public and discussion with the Board were provided during the agenda. 4 questions were provided by registrants in advance of the meeting and several questions were posed via the chat function on Zoom.

A summary of the questions and responses posed are identified below.

Who operates the gates now that Resolute is no longer operating its Papermill?

- H2O Power operates the dam at International Falls.

How much snow is expected for the watershed?

- NOAA looks at things like weather patterns and oceanic effects to develop their forecasts. A La Nina effect will occur this winter, giving more snow than average and possibly cooler temperatures. This is very far in advance. The Water Level Committee looks at forecasts and current conditions regularly to discuss with stakeholders and make recommendations for rule curve implementations annually in March.

Is there a monitoring program for zebra mussels on the Rainy-LOTW system?

- On the US side there are some local monitoring efforts for zebra mussels. The state of Minnesota also has state has a veliger water monitoring program. Due to the discovery of veligers in US waters Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) ramped up their water quality sampling program calcium which is a key indicator for zebra mussels. Based on the findings of the increased monitoring DNR was able to drop their approach to the lower range of tolerance in the summer. Some DNR sampling was constrained due to COVID-19. There is no known organized sampling effort known for the north side of the lake.

What is the status, level of activity, of remote tourism in the watershed? For example, canoeing and camping on the boundary and regional water routes.

- This is not necessarily something the Board has details about readily given the scope of the Board's mandate is focussed on water quantity, water quality and supporting conflict resolution on international water issues. The Board meets with Voyageur National Park and at times partners on various projects.
- During COVID people appear to be using the basin for these purposes as they did before. Board member and US Co-chair of the Community Advisory Group was able to share his experience noting that when first shutdowns occurred, reservations were lost but then they returned. Tourism has remained and it appears that there are a lot of new people using the wilderness areas and campsites. The Department of Natural Resources and Park Services have noticed some damages to campsites.

Could the project lead please provide additional detail about the state of the Wild Rice Mapping International Watershed Initiative (IWI) Proposal?

- Lucas King, Water Resource Specialist with the Territorial Planning Unit in Grand Council Treaty 3 is working on the proposal to identify key areas and operation structures to build communication protocols between dam operators and Treaty 3 in order to improve management for wild rice. This work is based on the engagement undertaken in 2019. Lucas King is in communication with the IJC to revise the methodology for the Stage 1 Foundational IWI proposal based on COVID-19 restrictions and resubmit it for consideration.

How is the Watershed Board addressing the climate and extinction crisis? Will the Watershed Board promote to its two governments proposals to ban sulfide-ore copper mining on public lands in the headwaters of the Rainy River Drainage Basin given concern about significant negative changes to the landscape and ecosystem?

- As it relates to mining, it is important to note the Board is not an advocacy body. It provides science-based insight and recommendations about the basin to the IJC and the Commissioners decides whether they will provide that advice to governments. A couple of Board projects looked at cumulative environmental impact assessments, which included not only how governments assess individual projects, but the cumulative impacts of a number of projects together. In addition, the potential for binational cumulative impact assessment was also examined. The Board provided recommendations to the IJC on this matter and advice was then provided by the Commissioners to government. Impacts from mining continues to be of interest along the entire Canada-US boundary so it is getting a lot of attention.
- Climate change considerations from a board perspective is raising questions about potential changes to flow in the basin and impacts on water quality/ecosystem health from a changing climate. More intense rainstorms washes more nutrients from land to the water and increased water temperatures linked to warming air temperatures may have broader effects algae growth, a key issue in the area. The Adaptive Management Committee is also applying climate change guidance that looks at impacts on water quantity and quality at a watershed level. An iterative assessment framework to note changes in the basin and develop adaptation approaches is being worked on.

Is anything or will anything be done to address mercury levels in the watershed?

- Minnesota has designated an impairment for mercury in Lake of the Woods and investigations into the sources of mercury have been undertaken. Minnesota water quality regulations address mercury levels. In Ontario the ban on coal fire power plants has also helped lower mercury levels. Mercury has also been identified as a contaminant for alert levels.

Has the Watershed Board been briefed on the shipments of high level radioactive wastes that are scheduled for shipment from Pinawa , Manitoba to Chalk River, Ontario and will be transported through the Lake of the Woods watershed?

- The CAG brought the nuclear transportation issue to the Board and the Board is aware of hazardous substances transported in the basin. More generally, an investigation was carried out to document safety plans for emergencies and provided recommendations. The CAG is in the process of reviewing emergency preparedness and reponse protocols with the intent to provide recommendations for consideration.
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OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The mandate of the board, which is focused on binational water quantity and quality issues as well as conflict resolution, continues to be good information to share with the public. Continuing to build awareness about the Board's mandate through public meetings should increase the public's understanding about the scope of issues the IRLWWB can study, advance and speak to.

Public meetings with the Board continue to be a good forum for sharing watershed information in general and connecting engaged members of the public with subject matter experts and resource managers responsible for various watershed issues within the basin.

Given the success of this meeting and the Board's increasing familiarity with using virtual platforms there may be opportunities for more interaction with various Board members beyond the Co-chairs during future public meetings.

The Board is appreciative of the public's participation in the 2020 virtual public meeting. The IRLWWB continues to look for ways to improve the engagement experience during public meetings and is open to feedback and suggestions.