



News Release

(HOLDREGE, Neb.) -- The Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District's board of directors heard input on the placement of a pedestrian bridge at Johnson Lake at Monday's monthly board meeting, but no action was taken to determine its final location.

Bruce Smith of Lexington appeared before the board on behalf of people who use large sailboats at Johnson Lake to ask Central's board to give additional consideration to the needs of sailboat owners before deciding the site for a proposed pedestrian bridge over the outlet canal at Johnson Lake.

He said the bridge, which would link segments of the lake's hike/bike trail, would interfere with the ability of large sailboats to access slips, docks and ramps in the outlet canal. Smith said the bridge would affect a handful of sailboats that regularly use the outlet canal, as well as others that periodically are launched at the lake.

Central accepted the donation of the bridge at its May board meeting from the Eilers family of Lexington. Since that time, the proposed bridge has been the subject of several meetings among members of the Johnson Lake community, the Johnson Lake Trails Committee and Central representatives during which alternatives to the proposed site have been discussed.

Smith said the Johnson Lake Development, Inc., the cabin-owners' association at the lake, recently passed a resolution asking Central to re-visit the issue to ensure that all possible alternatives are studied.

The Eilers family's donation was made in memory of Brian Eilers and as a gesture of appreciation to the Johnson Lake community and the desire to help provide a service to the development of the hike/bike trail.

Also at Monday's meeting:

- Several land and homeowners in the area that may be affected by construction of two regulating reservoirs attended the board meeting to voice concerns about the reservoirs' potential impacts. The proposed site of the reservoirs is along Central's Phelps Canal south of the Platte River and east of Lexington.

The public comments pertained primarily to the reservoirs' exact footprint, concerns about how possible seepage and drainage will be addressed, the timetable for construction, how roads and travel in the area will be affected, and insufficient communication with potentially affected landowners.

General Manager Don Kraus thanked the visitors for attending the board meeting and explained that the project is in a transitional phase.

"While the organizations that will partner in the reservoirs' construction have all signed the agreement, we have not yet received a notice to proceed," Kraus said. "The process of communications with landowners is also subject to certain rules and regulations."

As the project moves forward, he said, more details about the footprint, design and operation of the reservoirs will be made available.

The regulating reservoirs will re-time returns of water to the Platte River from Central's system to help offset shortages to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service target flows in the Platte River and benefit threatened and endangered species habitat along the river. The reservoirs are expected to yield about 40,000 acre-feet per year through retiming and will also be used to enhance periodic short-duration, high-flow events to help maintain the river's braided characteristic.

Additionally, Central will be able to use the reservoirs to increase generation efficiency at its J-2 hydropower plant while limiting impacts to irrigation operations and river flows.

Partners to the agreement include Central, the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, and the State of Nebraska through the Department of Natural Resources. The Program, through the federal government, will provide most of the \$75 million in funding for the project while DNR will provide approximately 25 percent of the costs. Central's share of construction costs will be capped at \$2.5 million.

Since the project is so closely tied to Central's hydro-irrigation system, Central was the logical entity to own and operate the reservoirs. It was also preferred that any water projects associated with the Platte River Program have a local sponsor/owner.

- Natural Resources Manager Mike Drain reported that conversations with representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service suggest that the construction of the J-2 Regulating Reservoirs may reduce the impact of a flow attenuation plan on Johnson Lake levels. The plan, developed with the FWS and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as part of Central's relicensing process, is intended to help attenuate or reduce flows on the Platte River below Overton during the least tern and piping plover nesting seasons. The plan requires Central to maintain space in Johnson Lake -- keep the lake lower -- during the spring and summer -- to temporarily capture high flows that may result from large rainfall events that would affect nesting terns and plovers.

"The regulating reservoirs would achieve this function," Drain said, "allowing us to operate Johnson Lake at a higher level during the spring and summer recreation season."

- The board authorized staff to begin negotiations with RJH Engineering for engineering and design services for the J-2 Regulating Reservoir. The board also approved Bruning State Bank as the entity that will provide financial services related to the reservoir's design and construction.

- Civil engineer Cory Steinke reported that Lake McConaughy's elevation as of Monday morning was 3229.7 feet (870,000 acre-feet; 49.9 percent of capacity). Inflows were 234 cubic feet per second, which is 24 percent of the historical average for Aug. 5, and 36 percent of the median or "normal" inflow for the date.

Steinke said the recent rainfall and cooler temperatures has reduced irrigation demand and enabled Central to substantially reduce releases from Lake McConaughy, but plans are still in place to use water already in the Supply Canal system to finish irrigation deliveries. The drawdown of Supply Canal lakes is scheduled to begin on Aug. 12 and end with the last irrigation deliveries on Sept. 2.

"The timing and amount of the drawdown will vary from lake to lake based on precipitation and irrigation demand," Steinke said. "The lake levels should start coming back up after Sept. 2, but how quickly that occurs depends on irrigation diversions by other canals on the Platte River and how much water is available to Central."

- Irrigation Division Manager Dave Ford informed the board that two more irrigation runs remain. While the recent rainfall has reduced demand for water and helped some customers catch up, the area remains about seven inches below the annual average for precipitation.

"The rain was certainly welcome," he said, "but I expect that August in Nebraska means we're still going to see some hot, dry weather and we'll need to irrigate through the end of the month."

- Ron Fowler of Johnson Lake, representing the Johnson Lake Chamber of Commerce, presented the board with a large drawing by cabin-owner Bonnie Marshall of Kearney depicting the recreational assets and activities at the lake. Fowler also thanked Central for its efforts to improve recreational opportunities at the lake.

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