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White Bear Lake has benefited from a 5-year stretch of high precipitation, but it's still far below ordinary levels, and many wonder if a solution will ever be found.



PIONEER PRESS PHOTOS: LIAM JAMES DOYLE

Brian McGoldrick, owner of Admiral D's Waterfront Tavern and a neighboring marina on White Bear Lake, has extended the marina's docks from 320 feet to 600 feet and seen the number of reserved marina spaces, once sold out, halved due to declining water levels.

Concern, questions, frustration over their lake

By Haley Hansen
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As of this fall, the dock at Brian McGoldrick's marina extends 600 feet into White Bear Lake, twice as long as it was several years ago. He can no longer rent out boat slips close to the shoreline, now home to muskrat lodges and cattails.

In recent years, low water levels have plagued White Bear Lake, the largest lake in the eastern Twin Cities area. While the lake has seen a slight rebound from its record low point, some areas of its shore still appear drought stricken.

McGoldrick, owner of Admiral D's Marina and Waterfront Tavern, said addressing the problem extends beyond any one entrepreneur's or lakefront dweller's qualms about

property values.

"This is for the working people," McGoldrick said. "Everyone has access to the lake."

Judy Brewer, 73, spent her early summers learning to swim in the lake and can recall summer holidays and weekends when lines of cars stretched down roads leading to the beaches.

LAKE CONCERNS, 4A >

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> Lake concerns

"Everything has revolved around the lakes in White Bear," Brewer said.

That same beach where she spent childhood summers has been closed for the better half of a decade and is now home to cattails and "no swimming" signs.

White Bear Lake is set to have a fifth consecutive year of above-average precipitation, according to data from the Minnesota Climatology Working Group. Because of the heavy rainfall, the lake is up 4 feet since hitting its record low in 2013. But it remains 2 feet below its ordinary high-water mark.

Residents and advocates say they worry that dry weather could push water levels down again. And while the current levels are an improvement, many worry that the lake hasn't fully recovered and won't without a long-term fix.

In March, a 4-year-old lawsuit against the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, brought by local advocates and homeowners over the lake levels, goes to trial. But the question of what exactly is causing the low water remains unanswered.

DOWNTOWN THRIVES

Not all area businesses rely on the lake.

"People come downtown to shop," said Tyler Conrad, owner of Goodthings in down-

town White Bear Lake. "They don't come downtown because of the lake."

The low water levels, Conrad said, are nothing new. His family has done business in downtown White Bear Lake for 43 years, during which time the lake's levels have continually risen and fallen.

White Bear Lake resident Janet Richards has owned businesses in downtown White Bear Lake for more than 20 years and runs Olive Branch Oil & Spice Co. in downtown. While the lake levels haven't had a huge impact on small businesses like hers, she said, they have taken a toll on the community.

"It's hard to see a beautiful asset have so much trouble," she said.

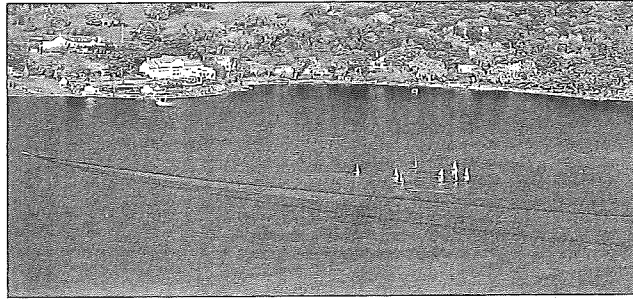
'NATURAL DYNAMICS'

What's draining White Bear Lake isn't clear.

Some experts say the natural ebb and flow of lake levels is a healthy part of the lake's ecology. But the residents involved in the lawsuit against the DNR blame the low water levels on overpumping from the nearby Prairie du Chien-Jordan aquifer.

Scientists with the United States Geological Survey analyzed 96 lakes in the northeast metropolitan area to determine why water levels recently declined in some, including White Bear Lake, but increased in others.

An October report from the USGS found that not all lakes in the area react the same way to weather and groundwater pumping. It also found that White Bear Lake is espe-



PIONEER PRESS: JOHN AUTEY
A small grouping of sailboats on White Bear Lake in October. A 4-year-old lawsuit against the Minnesota DNR brought by local lake advocates and homeowners alleging overuse of an aquifer in the northeast metro area goes to trial in March.

cially sensitive to lake-level changes because of its unique deep-water outlets.

Groundwater enters White Bear Lake from shallow sites near the shore and leaves from deep-water sites at the bottom of the lake, according to the study.

When water flows out from those sites, it flows into aquifers beneath White Bear Lake. Those deep-water outflows are uncommon in Minnesota lakes and make White Bear Lake uniquely sensitive to water-level declines.

Historically, White Bear Lake has the most significant highs and lows of neighboring lakes, the report found.

"Naturally, this is always going to occur," said Perry Jones, a USGS hydrologist who helped compile the report. "So there's always going to be some kind of drop."

The rise and fall of the lake levels can actually be good for the lake, as it helps a variety of plant species thrive, said Jason Moeckel, a water-resources section manager for the DNR. And the lake still has good water clarity and adequate fish and plant populations, Moeckel said.

"The natural dynamics of a lake going up and down are also important parts of the ecology of that lake," he said.

White Bear Lake's shoreline also has a very gradual slope, Moeckel said. So a reduction

of a few feet of water can mean dozens of feet of lost shoreline in some spots.

The second portion of the USGS report, which will help determine the effects of groundwater withdrawals on lake levels in general, is set to come out in January.

Those involved with the issue say that study will be key in understanding what's driving the low levels and in taking steps to address the problem.

THE LAWSUIT

In 2012, the White Bear Lake Restoration Association sued the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, alleging that low water levels in White Bear Lake were a result of overuse of an aquifer in the northeast metro area.

The city of White Bear Lake intervened in the lawsuit on behalf of the DNR. The White Bear Lake Homeowners' Association intervened on behalf of the WBLRA.

"We were so frustrated because there (seemed to be a) complete denial of the problem and an unwillingness to do anything about it," said Jim Markoe, president of the White Bear Lake Homeowners Association.

Along with the lawsuit, the White Bear Lake Restoration Association is pushing for communities' water supplies to switch from groundwater

to surface water, WBLRA president Greg McNeely said. The group also supports augmentation of the lake and conservation efforts, he said.

"The lake isn't filling up the way it should," McNeely said. "Every lake around the area is above average."

A report released to the Legislature earlier this year estimated that pumping water back into the lake could cost roughly \$55 million, although advocates are skeptical of the accuracy of the estimate.

From a scientific standpoint, it would take additional research to determine the impacts and feasibility, Moeckel said.

"It's complicated, and there's no easy answers," he said. "There's just a whole series of trade-offs and unknowns and things to consider."

CONSERVATION EFFORTS

White Bear Lake Mayor Jo Emerson said the water levels have been at the forefront of issues she's addressed in her six years as mayor. Some of her constituents' livelihoods depends on the lake. But for most residents, the low lake levels have no significant impact.

"I don't think it's a burning issue for a lot of people," Emerson said.

If anything positive has come from the low lake levels, she said residents are more

aware of conservation efforts and that the city has increased its focus on the issue.

"Just because we live in Minnesota doesn't mean we have unlimited water," she said.

The DNR is expected to set a protective elevation number for White Bear Lake in mid-December, said Barb Naramore, the DNR's assistant commissioner.

If groundwater withdrawal is hurting the lake, the DNR would need to adjust groundwater permits, potentially leading to restrictions or bans on nonessential water uses such as lawn irrigation, she said.

The DNR examines a lake's vegetation, habitat and shape and the impact those elements have on recreational uses when it sets protective elevations, Naramore said.

While conservation can help maintain lake levels, Jones said, the amount of any impact can vary. Conservation efforts primarily help maintain groundwater levels but have less of an effect on above-ground lake levels, he said.

Others said that the low lake levels have more to do with issues delegating sources of water.

"We don't have a water shortage at all," Markoe said. "We just have a water distribution problem."

But the lack of a definitive answer about what's draining the lake prevents progress in addressing the problem, Emerson said.

"We don't even know what's causing this, so how do you have a solution?" she said.

Though she no longer lives in White Bear Lake's city limits, Judy Brewer still regularly walks her dog along the lake shore path, gauging the water levels as she passes.

The record low water level in 2013 were a blow for the community, Brewer said. And while she's relieved the lake waters have risen, she said she still hopes for a long-term solution.

"Everyone wants to help, she said. "Nobody wants to see that beautiful lake disappear."