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HALLOWEEN HAPPENINGS: Where to get spooked PAGE 8A

Area's groundwater use meets state sustainability standard

BY DEBRA NEUTKENS
 EDITOR

The new Department of Natural Resources study that shows groundwater use is sustainable within a 5-mile radius of White Bear Lake also indicated that use has contributed to lower water levels.

It's a key finding in the scientific analysis that ran, per court order, in last week's Press. That finding indicated current groundwater use has contributed to water levels falling below the protective elevation for White Bear Lake set in 2016 by the DNR to protect

recreational uses.

District Judge Margaret Marrinan ordered the DNR last year to analyze the cumulative impact of its appropriation permits within the radius to determine whether pumping at the maximum rates allowed meets the state's sustainability standard, adopted in 2010. She asked that the analysis be completed within one year of her Aug. 30 order and its results be published in a public newspaper.

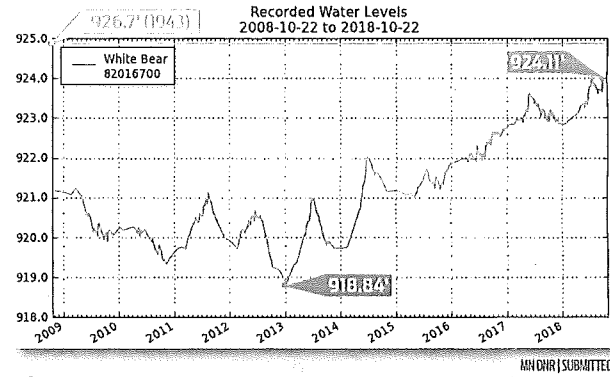
Marrinan's ruling also required the DNR to impose a variety of conditions on existing water permits in the

area, including a residential irrigation ban if the lake is below 923.5 feet in elevation. A moratorium was placed on that ban by the Legislature until July 2019.

The \$250,000 state-of-the-science groundwater flow model was developed by DNR staff and an outside consultant to assess the impacts of pumping on the lake and aquifer. Previous models could not make these kinds of assessments.

According to the analysis, year-round groundwater pumping was estimated to

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Last week, the lake was 924.11 feet, a foot higher than last year at this time and the highest it's been since 2003.

SUSTAINABILITY: Groundwater flow model provides valuable tool

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have a maximum effect on the lake of about 3 feet during dry weather. The surface of White Bear Lake has varied by as much as 8 feet since 1906, including an all-time low of 918.8 feet five years ago. DNR officials say the rise and fall of the lake is normal and natural.

"The levels are sustainable," noted Assistant DNR Commissioner Barb Naramore, who added the analysis will provide a valuable tool when working with local municipalities "to make sure the waters in and around White Bear Lake continue to provide their many benefits to the people who live and do business there, now and into the future."

Greg McNeely, chairman of the White Bear Lake Restoration Association whose lawsuit against the DNR resulted in the court order, feels the agency's conclusions are nothing new.

"Their findings are no more than a continuation of arguments they presented in court, which were rejected," he said. "The studies and evidence brought forward by experts, including the USGS (U.S. Geological Survey), were overwhelming. The lake is not sustainable. Unfortunately, the DNR's 'do nothing' policy has prevailed. The judge told the DNR they

were 'asleep at the wheel.' I'm glad I'm not riding in whatever they're driving."

Jim Markoe, president of the lake homeowners' association, an intervenor in the case on the side of the restoration association, commented, "Finally, the DNR has acknowledged groundwater pumping is impacting White Bear Lake."

"I also take issue with one specific thing in the summary: the period between 2003 to 2013 was a period of average or above-average precipitation," Markoe said. "There was one dry year in the entire decade, yet the lake reached an all-time record low. That is why this whole thing has become a cause for those of us who care deeply about the lake. There was more rain than average, yet the lake went down and down and down."

The DNR assistant commissioner said the effect of groundwater pumping on the level of White Bear Lake is something they've acknowledged in the trial all along.

"Where we differ is this question of whether existing patterns of groundwater use meet the state sustainability standard," Naramore said. "When we used the new flow model to do this more sophisticated analysis, we continued to conclude that it meets the standard. Obviously, we arrive at a different conclusion than the judge did in the case. The data is

consistent with our analysis and legal interpretations throughout the trial."

The model gives the agency enhanced understanding of how pumping influences lake levels, Naramore added. "It allows us to look at recreational implications and to work with permit holders going forward to see what modifications we can work on collaboratively to reduce impacts to recreation."

On a positive note, McNeely said he was encouraged by the last sentence in the three-page analysis: The part where the DNR said it has initiated discussions with affected community water suppliers regarding the findings.

"The DNR intends to explore conservation options and alternative water sources that can help ensure the lake remains a 'prized recreational asset,'" McNeely noted. "If they're serious about researching alternative water sources, we won't lose the lake when it stops raining."

The court-ordered analysis is not relevant in terms of the ongoing litigation between the DNR and the restoration association. The case is pending before the state Court of Appeals and can't be altered at this point. A ruling is not expected until the first half of 2019.