

Water Levels and Politicians

High Rock Lake is again being subjected to a lot of stress; from Mother Nature and the man-made kind. As water levels drop the HRLA is getting a lot of questions about what is going on. We don't have the answers, but offer the following to our members for consideration and thought.

Inflows to High Rock are historically low. As of July 20, 2008, 7:30 AM, the river flow at Yadkin College was 344 cubic feet per second. That's 17% lower inflow than the same date in 2002, the date High Rock was down a historic 24 feet below full. Perhaps we should all be very thankful the lake is only 5 feet below full. Current lake levels are better this year because of very conservative operation of the Yadkin Lakes by Alcoa, and the vigilance of the Drought Management Team. This writer believes we could have seen better water levels this spring and summer if the carefully negotiated new federal license had been allowed to become effective as planned without interference of political interests.

As a result of intensive lobbying by financial interests in Stanly County, North Carolina politicians decided to get involved in decisions affecting the future of High Rock, Tuckertown, Badin, and Falls Reservoirs. These lobbyists include a public relations firm (MMI Associates) and lawyers (Parker, Poe, Adams and Bernstein) to mount a campaign which is represented as returning the Yadkin River waters to the people of North Carolina. A very polished website has been created by a group called the N.C. Water Rights Committee, which can be viewed at: <http://ncwaterrights.org/Default.aspx> Much of the material on this website seems to have been produced by the public relations firms and the lawyers hired by the Stanly County interests.

During the past few weeks local newspapers have published articles based on press releases by both Alcoa and MMI Associates Inc... Each displays obvious bias. Frankly, this writer, as President of the High Rock Lake Association, is comfortable with the terms of the Relicensing Settlement Agreement (RSA). The HRLA Board of Directors believe the RSA provides terms that will protect and enhance High Rock Lake for our members. We are not sure of the possible consequences of operation of the lake by the State, or its agencies such as NCDENR. We do know that during negotiation of RSA terms, the HRLA and the State agencies were often at odds. However, in the end we all reached agreement and I'm disappointed the State seems to have let lobbyists derail that agreement.

Last fall Alcoa operated under terms of the Low Inflow Protocol that is a part of the RSA, and everyone was very happy with lake levels. Due to the Licensing delay, we now have a different situation. The NC Legislature's actions this week have delayed the issuance of a new license until at least mid-2009. The North Carolina Environmental Review Commission will make a recommendation on matters by February 2009. The Association will stay very involved with this situation and we hope to participate in the work of The Environmental Review Commission. You may contact members of the Commission to express your opinion, they are as follows:

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Just remember, the Stanly County interests have never made mention of their intentions or specifics on how our lakes should be operated. We have heard that many folks around Stanly and Badin Lake are upset that High Rock is not being used to keep Badin brimming full, as was past practice. Many environmentalists, including staff at state agencies, are more interested in maintaining river flows than seeing stable lake levels. The NC Wildlife Resources Commission has been a strong advocate of very restrictive Shoreline Management Plans, severely restricting pier construction, seawalls, and a ban on private boat ramps. These are among many perspectives that you must consider as you decide which basis you think is best for the lake.

Please e-mail us at hrla@hrla.com and express your opinion on current matters, or drop a note in the mail to us at P.O. Box 159, Southmont, NC 27351.