



IUGLS Public Meeting

Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) Detroit, Michigan

**February 20, 2008
Question and Answer Session**

Note: Slides used in the presentations are posted at www.iugls.org. Presenters were Kay Felt, U.S. Co-Chair of the Public Interest Advisory Group (PIAG); Dr. James Bruce, Canadian Co-Chair of PIAG; and Dr. Eugene Stakhiv, U.S. Co-Chair of the International Upper Great Lakes Study Board. The moderator was John Nevin, Communications Advisor for the International Joint Commission (IJC).

Question 1: *Can you comment on differences in lake levels between Lake St. Clair and Lake Huron.*

Kay Felt: We no longer use our lakefronts, from essentially Vernier Road north ... I'm on Lakeshore north of Vernier. We had to have two acres or more of fragmities poisoned this year, and we know that they will grow back to some degree. We hope that after a few years that we can start doing some remediation plans. I've owned property on the Gulf of Mexico, and now this property (in Grosse Pointe Shores) for nearly 20 years. I think we all recognize that the things that happen with owning waterfront property have changed. But the problem is that all of our changes, now, for many years, have been going in the wrong direction. We have at the same time, people on the west side of Michigan; Roger Smithe, and the Great Lakes Coalition ... people are saying, 'Be very careful what you do because it isn't that long ago that our properties were falling into the water. And if you change the lake levels between Michigan and Huron and the other lakes, then are you going to be creating a situation that will make our situation even worse when the water levels change?' And they think, as many of us do who have been watching the data, that inevitably those water levels will change again. For some of us, they can't change fast enough and for others they're very wary of what that change will bring because they fear their properties will be falling in the water again...And it wasn't all that long ago that that was happening....So all I can say is that we share much of the same circumstances. It perhaps has not hurt commercially quite as much. For example there was a newspaper article you might have seen stating that there are canals in St. Clair Shores that are now totally inaccessible. They are being declared wetlands. So the people who own those canals cannot dredge. So there is a lot going on on all of these lakes. I certainly am aware of the situation.

Question 2: *I agree with that, I understand. We were suffering from the high water level because we could float our boat and dock. It was rather nice for us, but a lot of other people I know had problems with shoreline erosion, especially around Lookout where we are they had a lot of problems and (used) concrete to protect their shoreline. So it's a constant ebb and flow and I understand that, but it did strike me very unusual that the difference in the lake levels between Huron and St. Clair kind of changed over the years, and that's what I was getting at. Part of that, then the question becomes how much water coming out of Lake Superior affects the lake levels of Michigan and Huron. Because we know that there are streams going in from surrounding areas. So is that part of the Study that the regulators look at, how much water comes out of Lake Superior, how does that affect the lake levels?*

Dr. Eugene Stakhiv: That's the principal purpose of it. Because the way the regulation plan was developed back in 1977, Lake Superior is a big reservoir. You use Lake Superior to actually balance out the levels of Lake Michigan and Huron. So if they get too low, more water is released from Lake Superior to keep the Lake Michigan-Huron water level higher. That's actually what the plan calls for. There are other rules that say if Lake Superior is near record lows, you release less water. But you still try to release as much water as you can, to keep the Lakes Michigan-Huron water level higher. There are counter-balancing forces, but the whole point of the 1977 Regulation Plan was to keep those two more in balance. You release more water than normal during low-flow periods. It's a big reservoir. You can only release so much, because then Lake Superior water levels start dropping precipitously, and at some point, you reach a threshold, and you say, 'Okay, we can't release anymore.'

Question 3: *What harm does it cause Lake Superior when the levels get too low?*

Dr. Eugene Stakhiv: Navigation through the locks. It's mainly shipping interests.

Dr. James Bruce: There are also major shoreline property interests on both sides of Lake Superior that we have to take into account as well.

Moderator: You also have Native Americans on Lake Superior who can no longer farm wild rice because there's not enough water.

Dr. Eugene Stakhiv: Also on Lake Huron.

Moderator (to Dr. Stakhiv): *Getting back to what Kay Felt was saying regarding concerns about high water levels in Lake Michigan ... If you had a flexible control structure in the St. Clair River, and you had an extreme rainfall, like 3 to 5 inches over the course of a 24-hour period, would there be a potential for flooding on the St. Clair because you can't move water out quickly?*

Dr. Eugene Stakhiv: Let me go back a little bit. The original studies done by the Army Corps of Engineers involved large control structures. They weren't thinking of semi-permanent structures like inflatable dams, or stuff that lies flat on the bottom and you just move them up hydraulically and lift them 3 or 4 feet to slow the water down. So those are some of the new ideas that are being floated around. So the old plans aren't going to help much anyway, so the Corps of Engineers will resurrect all of their old plans, but they're really not applicable to today's conditions. But all of these semi-permanent

structures could be used for extreme low water conditions. But once you put it in, what happens upstream and downstream? Lake Superior gets less water; Lake Ontario gets less water. So if you hold the water back in Lake Michigan and Huron, then you create the same problems downstream. So there has to be a balancing, not only balancing between Lake Superior and Lakes Michigan-Huron, but a balancing between the needs of the entire five-lake system. This is what the previous report said; no matter what you do, you're going to create some negative impact somewhere along the way, to some interest group, and they'll complain. So it's very difficult to balance all of these.

Question 4: *So the only real area to do that in would be before the Niagara Falls, because beyond that you wouldn't be accomplishing anything.*

Dr. Eugene Stakhiv: We just finished the Lake Ontario study. The people of Montreal yelled the most, because the less water they get, the less shipping can move up through that chain – the ocean-bound shipping – move up through the locks and dams. They are very much limited... They need at least 5 ½ meters of water in Montreal Harbor. Otherwise, the entire shipping, the international shipping (is adversely affected). You still have a shipping internally, but you can't be shipping products from Europe up the chain. So everyone has a stake in this stuff, and it's very difficult to balance all of this out, but yes, inflatable dams; semi-permanent weirs...the Italians have one in Venice. It sits on the bottom and then it just rises up against storm surges. But these are huge structures. We're talking about small structures. So this is the new class of ideas and techniques that the Corps needs to look at. Just dredging up all of those old plans isn't going to help you at all. It's a waste of time.

Moderator: One more follow-up, related to your question about what are the effects of lower water in Lake Superior, and this relates to all the lakes and has a special relevance to city governments, and that is where the water intakes are. If you have lower water levels, you may expose water intakes or have them in an area where the water is more turbulent and not suitable for drinking. It's a very expensive proposition to move those intakes out into deeper water. You'd have huge costs to city government.

Question 5: *This is a great discussion, but I do have a procedural question. Your slides were very helpful. Is the slide presentation available either online or as a hard copy?*

Moderator: It will be posted on our web page in the next day or two.

CONCLUSION

Kay Felt: You may have noticed that Save Our Shoreline is represented on the Public Interest Advisory Group ... David Powers in Saginaw. At his recommendation, we decided to hold off on our meeting in the Saginaw-Bay City area until the weather improves. I want very much to thank Gene Stakhiv and Jim Bruce. We have really had very good exchanges among our group. It has been a pleasure to work with these people and even when there are disagreements and differences – obviously everyone comes to this from their own individual perspective, which is why we have people from all over the Great Lakes and people from a wide variety of interests and affiliations – we have been able to work through the issues that we have faced, and we assume that we will work through it in the future. Part of what you raised is why I insisted that our that our plan evaluation people take the word "happy" out of their presentation because this is a

huge balancing act ... We will be eager to have public officials contact us and we're happy to have an interactive website so questions can be raised, and questions posed to the right scientific people. That is going to be a regular part of what we do. I want to thank those of you who have come today. I know that we hit probably a bad week for a lot of people since this is the week in southeast Michigan that many of the students are out of school, so many families are on vacation. We hope that this presentation will be available online for anyone who wants to see it. We had a lot of public officials at our meeting last night. If you look at the people who have served and are serving on the Study Board, we have such a wide range of talent; people who have been doing this for years and come from many perspectives. So unless there are more questions, we will say thank you.

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