

## Flood-wary river dwellers hope to persuade NYC's reservoirs to release water all year long

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Year-round water releases from three New York state reservoirs can help greatly in minimizing downstream Delaware River flooding, says the North Delaware River Watershed Conservancy.

The local conservancy will deliver that message this week to the four-state and New York City group that determines how often the Cannonsville, Pepacton and Neversink reservoirs release water.

The reservoirs on Delaware River tributaries collect New York City drinking water, but a 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decree also requires periodic releases to maintain minimum downstream average flow levels.

The decree in a case involving New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania affirmed the right of the city to divert 800 million gallons per day of water from Delaware River tributaries.

No releases take place during the summer, under the current operating agreement among decree parties, meaning there is no excess reservoir capacity to hold back new rainfall.

Public "listening sessions" are set for Tuesday at Sullivan County Community College in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., and Wednesday at the Nurture Nature Center in Easton.

Many who have already signed up to speak are concerned about a repeat of the three 2004-06 floods, said Gary Paulachok, a U.S. Geological Survey hydrologist at the Montague, N.J., flow monitoring station.

Others are concerned about water supply issues, the impact of releases on the cold-water trout fishery and aquatic ecosystems, and river recreation.

The June 2006 flood — which occurred when the reservoirs were full and couldn't take on more water — pushed the local river level well above its banks.

Floodwaters inundated the ground floor and four feet of the second floor of North Delaware Conservancy Executive Director Diane Tharp's Eilenberger's Land home in Smithfield Township.

The current agreement calls for a "void" in the reservoirs from Sept. 1 to March 15 at 90 percent of capacity — leaving 10 percent unused capacity in reserve for excess



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rain and snowmelt.

But reservoirs are filled to capacity in summer — the peak water use time in the city.

"We're trying to get that changed," said Tharp. "They need to have greater releases the entire year around."

Topped-off reservoirs leave no safety margin to help prevent or limit downstream floods in the summer, she said.

Even if the New York City reservoir operators react to new storms and start releasing excess water, it often is too late to avert downstream flood damage, said Jeromy Wo, also of the North Delaware Conservancy.

That's because the release valves work so slowly.

"The water flow (from the reservoir) might reach Trenton when the storm arrives," Wo said.

Another consequence of keeping the earthen dams full is that they might overtop, increasing the odds of a catastrophic reservoir collapse, Tharp contends.

"Our question is: Is someone looking at this?" Tharp said.

Tharp said New York City has sufficient water capacity to provide for its needs while maintaining a year-round void in reservoir levels.

A decree committee — including Pennsylvania representative Kelly J. Heffner — is holding the public sessions to hear comments on the flexible flow management plan, including possible changes.

Heffner is deputy secretary for water management at the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

New York City, New York state, New Jersey and Delaware also will be represented at Sullivan County and Easton.

"These are just opportunities for the public to speak directly to decree party principals," said Paulachok. "The decree parties want to hear what the public has to say."

Event organizers will present a brief overview before taking testimony but won't get involved in any dialogue or debate, Paulachok said.

Speakers can sign up online by searching for "Delaware River Master" or register at the sessions.

Decree party officials will likely consider both short-term and long-term changes to their agreement, he said.

Any changes in the agreement, which expires June 1, 2014, have to be approved unanimously by the five decree parties.

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