

FRIENDS OF THE UPPER DELAWARE RIVER

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Conservation Groups Say They Are Optimistic as Expiration Nears for Delaware Flow Plan

Delaware River conservationists say they are optimistic that the government agencies responsible will take appropriate action as the expiration date draws near for the flawed plan that governs releases from the New York City-owned reservoirs.

The infamous Flexible Flow Management Program - regarded as a disappointment by scientists, river residents and recreational users alike - is due to expire on June 1.

Government officials are now well-aware that the Delaware Watershed Conservation Coalition is supporting an alternative known as the Joint Fishery White Paper, produced last year by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

The White Paper proposal would bring more consistent flows from the reservoirs, protecting the river's habitat against the yo-yo releases common under the expiring flow plan. The White Paper plan would keep more life-sustaining cold water in the rivers during the hot summer months, when it is needed most.

The wet spring this year has provided a lesson in water management, said Dan Plummer, a member of the coalition and board chairman of Friends of the Upper Delaware River.

"We have shown repeatedly there is plenty of water to go around if the resource is managed properly, and this idea is supported by many highly respected conservation groups," he said. "Members of the watershed coalition have pleaded our case over and over again, and now it's in the hands of the powers that be."

So far this spring, reservoirs have had some voids to store most of the excess rainwater, yet spillage from the reservoirs added to conditions that reached very near to flood stages.

Decisions about the expiring water-release plan will be made by the Delaware River Basin Commission, whose members include representatives from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and New York City.

Plummer and other environmentalists have had a series of meetings in the past month with principals involved in the upcoming water-flow decision, including John Plonski, assistant commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Conservation; John Hines, deputy secretary for water management with the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, and Paul Rush, deputy commissioner for the New York City Department of Environmental Protection.

"We have had constructive conversations with a number of people, and a group of us are heading to Washington, D.C., this week to meet on the Hill with many of our senators and representatives to gauge our support for issues connected to the health and safety of the Delaware River and its tributaries," said Plummer.

He noted that some river advocates have charged that a secret deal has been struck to extend the flawed FFMP for yet another year.

"We have been assured that this is not the case," said Plummer. "We are optimistic that all possibilities are still in play, but all we can do is count on the honesty of our government officials."

Plummer noted that various conservation groups have invested heavily in the river's well-being, including vocal opposition to hydrofracking of gas in the Delaware watershed.

Friends of the Upper Delaware River, for example, has been key in helping to protect the river against many environmental threats to the area. The group has dedicated thousands of hours and vast sums of its own money on restoring streams in our area, often in partnership with government agencies that may not have the funds or manpower to get the job done on their own.

Plummer said the coalition groups were allied with the New York City DEP in the effort to prevent unsafe drilling practices in the Delaware watershed.

“I believe that we all want the same thing, from New York City to the Catskills and downstream all the way to Delaware Bay and estuary,” Plummer said. “We all want a healthy Delaware River. It is in the best interest of everyone involved, whether you are river resident, a Manhattan resident, a water bureaucrat or a flyfisherman.”

In April, the Delaware was designated a “Great Water,” joining 18 other waterways nationwide selected for that honor by a national coalition formed to protect waterways of high economic, social and environmental importance.

The America’s Great Waters Coalition, based in Washington, was formed in 2009 to advocate for the restoration and protection of lakes, bays, rivers and marshes that are rich in natural resources and have a significant impact on their surrounding regions.

The Delaware River is the longest un-dammed river east of the Mississippi, flowing for 330 miles from Hancock, N.Y., to the Delaware Bay, where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean. More than 15 million people in four states depend on the river’s water for drinking, agricultural and industrial use. The Delaware includes natural wonders - three stretches along its course are included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers program - and important commercial assets.