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GRANNIS: NEW DELAWARE RIVER PLAN BALANCES FISHERY, FLOOD CONTROL AND WATER SUPPLY

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Pete Grannis today endorsed a new water-management proposal for the Delaware River reservoirs, saying it would improve trout habitat, bolster flood mitigation efforts and restore a more natural flow to the river.

The new program was agreed to unanimously by New York State, New York City, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware, through the Delaware River Basin Commission. The reservoirs not only feed the Delaware and other rivers but also supply drinking water to 17 million people.

“This is an innovative plan for dealing with a long-running issue,” Grannis said. “Flood control, the trout fishery, biodiversity and recreation opportunities all can be aided while assuring adequate quantities of drinking water to millions. This new water release protocol could serve as a national model.” The commissioner also noted that the trout fishery is a major economic engine in the region.

Major highlights of the plan – which is still subject to a public comment period and review – include:

- § More water for the East Branch and West Branch of the Delaware River and the Neversink River. Under a 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decree, New York City could divert up to 800 million gallons per day from the reservoirs. However, NYC has agreed to cap that at 765 million gallons.
- § Better trout habitat. Because of the extra available water, the river will be able to maintain colder and more regular temperatures.
- § Natural flows. Flows will be modified to reflect more natural water levels, an attribute desired by many anglers and environmentalists. It will allow more water to be released when reservoirs are full or near full; and when reservoirs reach a certain level, releases are switched to lower releases -- but to levels that are still high enough to protect aquatic habitat.

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- § Flood mitigation. New York City has agreed to keep reservoirs at levels that are, in most instances, less than full so that stormwater has a place to go during flood events. The intent is to reduce flows and floods downriver from the Cannonsville, Pepacton and Neversink reservoirs during extreme conditions.
- § An end to daily calculations to determine releases. In the past, a difficult, drawn out and, at times, contentious practice of daily computations was employed to determine releases. Instead, the plan will use scientific habitat research and computer modeling to develop a series of water releases that are tied to the reservoir levels and to the season of the year. Daily calculations would no longer be necessary.
- § Better public information. Forecasts about reservoir levels will be available more than a day in advance, perhaps as much as several weeks in advance.

The plan drew praise from groups that have long worked on Delaware River Basin issues.

“We have been working for more than 30 years to bring about managed releases and flows for the Delaware River system and are pleased to see a new plan finally emerge,” said Ron Urban, president of the New York State Council of Trout Unlimited. “This approach will achieve higher and more protective water releases for the wild fish and aquatic life in these prolific rivers while continuing to protect New York City’s drinking water supply.”

“We applaud the agreement to alter the management of its dams in the Upper Delaware River basin to better support downstream aquatic species and ecosystems,” Kathy Moser, Acting State Director for The Nature Conservancy in New York. “We are pleased to have worked with DEC, the Delaware River Basin Commission and New York City in their search for ways in which the water resources of the Catskill/Delaware Water Supply systems might be managed more sustainably for aquatic wildlife while providing an outstanding water supply for the city.”

The plan goes into effect on an interim basis immediately. After taking public comment, the Delaware River Basin Commission will vote on the plan next year.

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