



Opinion Piece – Bigger Dams Not Wanted or Needed on the Delaware

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Dear Editor,

At this moment, our communities are facing dramatic changes in how Delaware River flows will be regulated and divvied up among the four watershed states.

How to manage the reservoirs that were built on the river's headwaters to supply New York City with drinking water and how to best regulate the river's flow for the others who live downstream in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Delaware has always been subject to vigorous debate – things have not changed -- and now issues such as flood control have been thrown into the mix.

In order to implement a deal already cut between the watershed states and New York City, the Delaware River Basin Commission is taking public comment now (through January 18) on a new reservoir management plan, the so-called Flexible Flow Management Plan. This plan is contingent upon a fundamentally flawed assumption – that the upper Delaware River needs to be further dammed to create more water storage in order to achieve the goals of the deal already struck between the four states and NYC.

The three reservoirs that dam the major tributaries of the upper Delaware River already allow New York City to drain off up to 800 million gallons per day (on average) of Delaware River water. The massive size of these obstructions and their storage capacity has a dominating effect on the health and flows of the entire River, impacting all communities who live in this watershed.

The proposed management plan will supposedly improve how the reservoirs are managed including allowing for flows that are more beneficial to the aquatic life of the Delaware. In order for New York City to agree to these changes in reservoir management, the four watershed states agreed to a plan to increase the height of the dams, adding 13 billion gallons of reservoir storage capacity.

But higher dams and more storage are not what is needed on our river – it is not an acceptable path forward. First, the agreed upon plan is going to be implemented for three years without any raised dams or additional storage – so clearly higher dams are not needed for this plan to be implemented. In addition, the plan calls for releases to provide flood protection, releases that could jeopardize the drinking water and fishery protection goals of the reservoirs, and that cannot provide reliable and complete flood protection.

Assertions that the dams can and should be used for effective downstream flood control are hollow and dishonest. Altering flow releases so as not to contribute to flooding in communities immediately downstream of the existing dams may make sense – their immediate proximity to the dams means that they can become victim

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to spills created by the dams. But beyond these communities, suggesting that raised dams in the future, or current dams in the present, could provide flood protection to communities further down along the Delaware is misleading and unfair. Promising undeliverable flood protection to downstream communities actually encourages flood prone homes to remain on floodprone lands, and encourages new development in these same dangerous places. Promising undeliverable flood protection also means that our communities and region will not have the time, resources or the inclination to seek out and fund truly effective flood protection measures.

The best flood protection, the only true flood protection, we can provide is to prevent new development in the floodplain, to remove existing development where it has occurred (except for those instances where there are unique cultural, historic or other community values it is agreed should be preserved) and to restore the floodplain so it can function to reduce flood damages and provide a healthy riparian habitat. This supports the goals of a healthy fishery, clean drinking water, and vibrant ecotourism as well.

The raising of the dams on the Delaware's headwaters streams is a concept unacceptable to the Delaware Riverkeeper Network and most people in the basin. What is needed is a reservoir management plan based upon publicly agreed upon goals, for the benefit of the river's wildlife, ecosystems and communities. Positive economic consequences of a river-protection-driven process will flow from a plan based on these priorities as is proven by the fact that the Wild and Scenic Delaware River attracts as many visitors as the largest of our National Parks. That is an asset that cannot be duplicated.

The kind of back door dealmaking that has taken place here – four powerful governors agreeing to allow a powerful mayor to pursue plans to build bigger dams for more water storage is not what our watershed communities need or deserve. We need decision-making based on river – and community – protection priorities. We need open public dialogue prior to the deal being struck – not a phony process that tries to make a bad deal look good.

Respectfully submitted,

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the Delaware Riverkeeper