

SUSQUEHANNA RIVER BASIN COMMISSION
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CONOWINGO RESERVOIR OPERATIONS PLAN
RELEASED FOR PUBLIC COMMENT
Leakage and Minimum Release Requirement Cited as Most Critical Variables

HARRISBURG, Pa. – The Susquehanna River Basin Commission (SRBC) today released for a 45-day public comment period a draft plan regarding the management of the Conowingo Pond, the 14-mile interstate reservoir formed behind the Conowingo Dam on the lower Susquehanna River that straddles the Pennsylvania-Maryland state line. The 100+-page report, *Conowingo Pond Management Plan*, is the result of a 4-year planning initiative led by SRBC and the Conowingo Pond Workgroup and includes a proposed protocol for reservoir operations during times of critical low flows to meet public health and safety, environmental and economic needs.

The Conowingo reservoir provides water for public water supply systems, energy production, recreational activities and aquatic habitat, and provides fresh water to the upper Chesapeake Bay. Current reservoir users include the Chester Water Authority, City of Baltimore, Peach Bottom Atomic Power Station and Muddy Run Pumped Storage Hydroelectric Facility, Conowingo Hydroelectric Station, and many recreational users. On March 15, 2006, SRBC approved an application by Conectiv Mid-Merit, LLC to withdraw 19.01 million gallons per day from the pond and to consumptively use 8.72 million gallons per day for cooling purposes.

Under current operating protocol, the reservoir level may drop during prolonged droughts to the point where potential conflicts arise and difficult decisions have to be made regarding priority uses. During those times, the dam operators are required by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to maintain minimum releases to the lower Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay and to meet recreational needs by maintaining minimum water surface levels in the reservoir.

The purpose of the Conowingo management plan is to minimize the stresses on the water resources during times of drought to help avoid the water use conflicts and ensure adequate flows to the lower Susquehanna River and the upper Chesapeake Bay.

“The severe droughts we experienced in the late 1990s and earlier this decade brought to bear the very delicate balance that exists at the reservoir,” said SRBC Federal Alternate Commissioner Col. Robert Davis, Jr. (District Commander, Baltimore District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers). “Those drought events seriously challenged the agencies and companies working to maintain an adequate reservoir level while protecting downstream communities and habitat, including the Chesapeake Bay. It was clear that a new resource management plan was needed to avoid these risks during future droughts.”

The Conowingo Pond Workgroup, chaired by the Maryland Department of the Environment, assessed the issues and problems, evaluated the operational alternatives using an effective hydrologic computer model, and then identified select management options, including options that SRBC should incorporate into its regulations and overall water management program.

Among its findings, the workgroup concluded that the dam's leakage rate – water that passes through the dam even when turbines are not operating – and the minimum downstream release requirement are the most critical variables affecting the management and viability of the reservoir during low flows. As such, a protocol to allow for credits on leakage was established by the workgroup and is the focal point of the management plan.

The protocol recommends an automatic leakage credit at the dam of up to 800 cubic feet per second (cfs) be automatically allowed (except April 1 – June 30) when the flows at the upriver Marietta gage (Lancaster County, Pa.) drop to pre-determined seasonal flow thresholds. The Marietta gage thresholds were developed based on fishery needs and were set by FERC. The Conowingo dam operators would have to petition for and receive a license amendment from FERC to implement the credit for leakage.* The April through June exception on the automatic credit is to protect aquatic resources as migratory fish species, including the American shad, navigate the Susquehanna for the annual spring spawning run.

By allowing the Conowingo dam to take credit for the leakage rate during low flow periods, the dam operators would be able to reserve more water in the reservoir to maximize the storage for a longer duration. Especially in the event of an extreme and prolonged drought, maximizing storage would better safeguard the multiple water users and provide more water to meet instream needs and for downstream releases.

The management plan included other recommendations, including:

- SRBC should consider the impacts of increasing consumptive water use throughout the Susquehanna basin on the Conowingo pond and determine if mitigation measures are needed.
- SRBC and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers should investigate alternative operational strategies for the water storage owned by SRBC at the Corps' Cowanesque and Curwensville Lake projects to provide more effective low flow augmentation, including benefits to the Conowingo pond and instream resources below the dam.
- SRBC should incorporate key management principles and tools described in the plan, including the use of the annually-updated hydrologic computer model into SRBC's regulatory and water resource management programs.

The Conowingo Pond Workgroup included representatives from SRBC, federal agencies, Maryland and Pennsylvania state agencies, county governments, and operators from the three hydroelectric facilities on the lower Susquehanna River, the Muddy Run Pumped Storage Facility, the Peach Bottom Atomic Power Station, and local water utilities. The group met periodically over the 4-year period and provided guidance and oversight of the project.

SRBC Deputy Director Tom Beauduy said, "This interstate project can serve as a model for how federal, regional, state and county agencies, and private interests from multiple states can work together to meet important water resources needs. The Commission is pleased to have provided the leadership and technical support needed by the workgroup to accomplish this project."

The draft plan is available on SRBC's web site at www.srbc.net, and on CD-Rom or hard copy format upon request. Persons interested in commenting on the draft plan should direct their comments by May 17, 2006 to Andrew Dehoff, Director of Planning and Operations, Susquehanna River Basin Commission, 1721 North Front Street, Harrisburg, PA, 17102, Phone: (717) 238-0423, ext 221, Fax: (717) 238-2436, E-Mail adehoff@srbc.net.

* During low flow periods in 1999, 2001, 2002 and 2005, when emergency or near-emergency conditions existed as serious impacts were developing, FERC did temporarily allow the Conowingo Hydroelectric Station to take credit for leakage.

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