

Sen. Cowles: Applauds FERC's Shawano Lake decision

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SHAWANO– Senator Robert Cowles (R-Green Bay) released the following statement applauding the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) [decision today](#) to provide an exemption to the Shawano Paper Mills Dam's permit, which will allow lake levels to remain at historic norms and benefit recreation on Shawano Lake:

“Between the dam operators, Shawano Area Waterways Management, numerous local bodies of government, the Shawano County Chamber of Commerce, and local state legislators including myself, I continue to be very pleased with the partnership that's been formed in Shawano which has led to numerous temporary amendments and today's permanent amendment to raise the water levels. Shawano Lake is a dynamic recreation hub to visit and a fun and relaxing place to call home. This order is very welcome news to allow residents and visitors to continue enjoying their weeknights and weekends like they always have: safely on Shawano Lake.”

For many years, the Shawano Paper Mills Dam owners would operate the water levels for Shawano Lake at 802.9 feet. However, starting in 2015, that level was ordered to be dropped to 802.5 feet, about five inches lower than normal. Since that decision and after being made aware of the issue from constituents who are part of Shawano Area Waterways Management, Senator Cowles has been engaged in successful efforts to seek a series of temporary approvals to raise lake levels. After the last temporary order was issued, FERC required the dam owners and interested parties to conduct studies, consult other state and federal regulators, and present an application for a permanent amendment. Senator Cowles joined his colleagues Senator Mary Felzkowski (R-Irma) and Representatives Peter Schmidt (R-Bonduel) and Jeff Mursau (R-Crivitz) – all of which also represent portions of Shawano Lake – in writing a [letter of support](#) for the granting of a permanent amendment by FERC.

“While a five inch difference in lake levels may not seem like a lot, in the relatively shallow Shawano Lake, lower lake levels may harm the safety, wellbeing, and property of those who enjoy recreating on or around the lake and those who rely on the estimated \$39 million in economic activity generated by the lake. The approvals of the temporary amendments to the dam’s operating water levels provided a band-aid, but a long-term solution was needed. Today, Shawano Lake finally received that solution, hopefully ending an eight-year fight and ensuring that Shawano Lake will remain ready for anyone looking to recreate all summer, every summer, in perpetuity.”

The break from historic water levels which started in 2015 resulted in concerns from lake-goers for their safety and ability to recreate due to hazards on the already shallow Shawano Lake. Numerous obstructions on the lake bottom, including sand bars and driftwood, can damage watercraft and may threaten the safety of passengers. Additionally, at a lower lake level, the ability to use common access points, including beaches, shorelines, docks, and boat launches, may not be available. This reality drove concerns from local residents that lower lake levels would not only impact human welfare and property, but potentially the economic wellbeing of the area.

In [FERC’s final order](#) granting the request for these higher water levels, they recognized what advocates for these sensible water levels have been saying for years. This includes parts of the order which state that “Commission staff finds the exemptee’s proposed raise the normal target impoundment elevation would increase recreation and boater safety,” that the proposal “would not adversely affect the environment,” and that the proposal “would have a beneficial effect on recreation resources”, including “land-based recreation, use of boat docks, and boating opportunities ... due to the proposed additional 0.4 feet of elevation in the reservoir.”

“Over the past few years, I’ve been pleased to work with Shawano Area Waterways Management and other local leaders on a number of efforts, including raising the bridge clearance on County Road HHH to allow easier access to the channel by boat, supporting the awarding of grant funds for a mechanical aquatic weed cutter to replace an aging device, and working on solutions to reduce the impact of ice shoves to property owners which have damaged shorelines. But while all these efforts were important to the people impacted, the issue of lake levels has been more complicated and more difficult as the final decisions have rested with agency staff in Washington DC. Thank you to FERC for coming to the right decision today,

and thank you to Shawano Area Waterways Management for elevating the voices of those impacted in Shawano County to ensure that FERC took these important stories into account when issuing today's order.”