

Fish kill in Pigeon River blamed on dam, sediment; second time since 1984

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John Walters scoops a handful of sediment from the bottom of the Pigeon River at Ford Lake Road, two miles downstream of a dam. Walters, the president of the local chapter of Trout Unlimited, fishes the river daily and said the muck wasn't there before the dam released a heavy flow of water and sediment earlier this week, killing much of the fish in the river. HT - Chris Engle

CORWITH TOWNSHIP — A discharge of sediment and water from a dam earlier this week is being blamed for a fish kill on the Pigeon River.

This marks the second time in almost 24 years the dam at Song of the Morning Ranch, east of Vanderbilt on Sturgeon Valley Road, has caused a fish kill on the river (see story below). The dam holds back at least a five-acre impoundment which contains a large amount of silt and sediment.

"We're still investigating. We know there was a lot of sediment released and a fish kill," said Dave Borgeson, DNR Fisheries supervisor for the Northern Lake Huron Management Unit. "We're working with the Dept. of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to assess what did occur."

Jim Pawloski, PE, Dam Safety Engineer at the DEQ Gaylord office, met with dam operators at the ranch who say a malfunction in the dam's automated system allowed too much water--along with silt--to be released into the Pigeon River (see story below).

Borgeson observed dead fish including trout, suckers and creek chubs in the river which, he said, contained "a lot of silt." Fisheries staff conducted an electroshocking survey of a section of river and "didn't find what we'd expect for trout."

A DNR press release Thursday stated brown trout up to 19 inches were among the dead, killed either by sediment or thermal shock from the warmer impoundment waters. [Here's the press release.](#)

Analyses of dissolved oxygen and pH by the DEQ Wednesday determined the river to be within state water quality standards, according to Ryan Blazic, Environmental Quality Analyst for the DEQ.

John Walters, the president of the Headwaters Chapter of Trout Unlimited believes the sediment could leave the river practically lifeless for a year or more.

"The river turned black as oil," said Walters. "There's been a total wipeout of the river."

Walters, who frequently fishes the Pigeon River for trout, said the river was flowing at an abnormally high rate Sunday evening and observed heavy sediment in the river, before the flow plummeted Monday morning. He said normal flow has returned, but the sediment is still there. Bruce Walker, district biologist for the DEQ, said normal flow is around 65 to 70 cfs.

Data from the United States Geological Survey shows the river's flow began rising above normal Sunday afternoon and spiked at 180 cubic feet per second (cfs) just before 1 a.m. Monday morning. The flow then dropped suddenly to a mere 6 cfs at 8 a.m., before rising sharply to normal levels. Click [here](#) to see charts.

Walters explained trout need cold, clear, flowing water to survive.

Song of the Morning Ranch is east of Vanderbilt on Sturgeon Valley Road. A representative could not offer comment on Wednesday afternoon.

This story will be updated as more information becomes available.

24 years ago, dam caused massive fish kill

CORWITH TOWNSHIP — It happened before.

According to Herald Times' archives, between July 2 and July 3, 1984, the impoundment at Song of the Morning Ranch was partially drained, releasing "tons of jelly-like sediment" into the river and killing thousands of fish.

At that time, the Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR) issued a cease-and-desist order on work being done to the dam, and ordered an inspection of the dam by an engineer.

Several hearings to decide the dam's fate were held in the following weeks, and Song of the Morning Ranch was allowed to continue the operation of the dam for hydroelectric power.

Roy Hoobler, current president of the Pigeon River Country Association (PRCA), remembers that incident and compares it to the similar event which sent sediment into the river earlier this week, killing fish and clouding the water (see related story).

"It's an accident waiting to happen," said Hoobler of the dam. "The association has always felt this is a problem. It shouldn't be there.

"It's an invitation to a problem unless there's some serious regulation of the dam," he concluded.

The PRCA will hold their annual meeting and sandwich lunch at the Pigeon River Forest Headquarters July 6, 12:30 p.m. The public is welcome to attend and discuss the issue.

Automatic system faults, opens dam gate

DEQ investigating whether violations occurred

CORWITH TOWNSHIP — Dam operators told the Dept. of Environmental Quality an automatic system which regulates the flow of water from an impoundment into the Pigeon River faulted, opening a gate and allowing heavy water flow and sediment into the river.

Jim Pawloski, PE, Dam Safety Engineer for the DEQ Gaylord office, said dam operators decided to override

the system Sunday night and open one of two gates partially to allow rainwater to escape.

"Apparently, some time in the night, the automatic operations system opened, almost completely, the second gate," Pawloski explained. "Monday morning, (ranch) staff observed the impoundment had lowered several feet and manually closed the gates, which stopped almost all flow into the river.

"After recognizing the stream was receding, they gradually reopened the gates to get back the normal flow," Pawloski continued.

[This chart illustrates the flow of water in the Pigeon River over that time period.](#)

Pawloski described the dam to "appear in functional condition." Along with the two gates, the dam has an overflow spillway and a spillway for a hydroelectric generator.

John Arevalo, Cadillac Dist. Supervisor of the Land and Water Management Division of the DEQ, says an investigation to determine whether dam operators violated these DEQ statutes:

- Inland Lakes and Streams: states permits are required to dredge, create or diminish a lake; violation would occur if dam operators intentionally released more water than that typical of day-to-day operations without a permit; and
- Water Resources Protection: bans the pollution or injury of a river or floodplain with sediment

"If we determine a violation has occurred we will send a notice of violation and provide an opportunity to correspond," said Arevalo.

Click [here](#) to visit the DEQ site and read more about Inland Lakes & Streams protection.