



ENVIRONMENT

Lake George to move ahead in battle against milfoil

By Gwendolyn Craig

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The Adirondack Park Agency on Thursday approved a controversial plan to apply an herbicide to two infestations of invasive Eurasian watermilfoil in Lake George. Photo by Gwendolyn Craig

In split vote, APA approves herbicide use, despite opposition

By Gwendolyn Craig

Despite objections from several stakeholders, the Adirondack Park Agency on Thursday approved a controversial plan to apply an herbicide to two infestations of invasive Eurasian watermilfoil in Lake George.

The Lake George Park Commission received two 6-4 votes in favor of permits [**to begin testing ProcellaCOR EC in Blair's Bay in Hague and Sheep Meadow Bay near Huletts Landing**](#), both on the lake's east side.

APA Chairman John Ernst voted against the treatments, as did members Zoe Smith, Mark Hall and Andrea Hogan. Members Dan Wilt, Art Lussi, Ken Lynch, Matt Tebo, Brad Austin and Joe Zalewski voted for the permits.

"I'm uncomfortable using this as an experiment," Ernst said.

Smith, who is also the deputy director of the Paul Smith's College Adirondack Watershed Institute, said she wouldn't approve the permits without a more robust study of the ecosystem and the potential impacts of the herbicide. In Blair's Bay, particularly, a threatened species called alternate flower watermilfoil, may be impacted by the herbicide.

"This doesn't seem like the ... ecosystem analysis that I guess I feel comfortable with, when I'm being asked to uphold the 'no undue adverse impacts' and the freshwater wetlands act and things that we're being asked to do as a board," Smith said.

Hogan, who is also the Johnsbury town supervisor, said she, too, felt the agency was missing an opportunity to learn more about the herbicide application. She wouldn't support the permits after the Town of Hague's board condemned them, she said.

Lussi and other board members felt the herbicide was more environmentally beneficial than the impacts of Eurasian watermilfoil. Austin, the Empire State Development representative on the APA, said the park commission was courageous for bringing the application forward. He said "it's going to make a big difference to the health of our lake and to the health of the economy of the park."

The Lake George Association and Lake George Waterkeeper Chris Navitsky assailed the project. Navitsky declined to answer whether the LGA would take legal action when asked after the vote.

In 2020, the APA approved ProcettaCOR EC, a kind of synthetic plant hormone, for use in Minerva Lake to address that body's Eurasian watermilfoil problem — a program that officials deemed a success.

As for Lake George, several Adirondack lake associations, as well as the Nature Conservancy's Adirondack Park Invasive Species Prevention Program and the Warren County Soil and Water Conservation District, supported the park commission's permit applications and the use of the herbicide.

But some environmental organizations, regional advocacy groups, local governments and APA board members had reservations about the use of an herbicide that has been registered by the federal Environmental Protection Agency only since 2018.

The APA board learned on Thursday that more than 100 comments for multiple projects before the board's review that day had gone into the agency's email spam folder. Staff said they reviewed the letters before the meeting.

The Lake George Association and Adirondack Council has opposed the use of ProcellaCOR in Lake George, citing what it has described as insufficient data on its long-term impacts. The Hague Town Board also unanimously passed a resolution this week opposed to the park commission's permit applications.

The EPA, state Department of Environmental Conservation and state Department of Health, have all vetted and approved use of the herbicide. Even those comfortable with the state and federal agencies' findings were concerned about the APA's passage because of lingering questions.

Environmental groups pushed for the APA to conduct a special hearing with an appointed officer to oversee sworn testimony. They sent a letter to APA Executive Director Barbara Rice and Gov. Kathy Hochul's administration.

Such comprehensive hearings, once common with the APA, **have not been scheduled in more than a decade**. One of the letter writers, Dave Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, sounded exasperated at the end of the meeting. Considering the more than 300 public comments submitted, most against the project, and with board members seeking more data, Gibson said the project "demanded" a hearing.

"That is a significant statement by a significant number of agency members, who have questions that have not been answered," Gibson said, of the 6-4 vote. He said he had not seen such a split vote in years.

Steve Ramant, deputy town supervisor of Hague, also said he wanted a public hearing for the nine municipalities around Lake George.

"They live on this lake; they drink out of this lake," Ramant said. "You've got 93% of the people replying to this item in a 'no' fashion. I think the public should be heard. I think it's not fair for the people who live on this lake to not have a say at a public hearing."

The Lake George Park Commission is holding a public information session at 3 p.m. on Friday with a question-and-answer session for the public. The remote meeting can be accessed on the park commission's website: <https://lgpc.ny.gov/>.

Eurasian watermilfoil has been in Lake George since the 1980s. The park commission spends nearly \$500,000 a year pulling the plants by hand or using divers, who pull out the plants' root balls and shove them up an underwater vacuum. APA staff said the park commission is looking for another tool to add to its arsenal in the fight against this invasive species that grows in thick mats and chokes out other native plants.

Minerva Lake in Essex County was the first water body the APA board approved for the herbicide's use. Surveys show since the 2020 application, only one Eurasian watermilfoil plant was found in the lake, and that was outside the treatment area. Some native plants were also impacted by the herbicide, though APA staff said those bounced back the following year.

The herbicide is a synthetic plant hormone that EPA has deemed “practically nontoxic” to fish, birds, mammals, amphibian and reptiles. That is EPA's lowest level of toxicity. It is considered “slightly toxic” to invertebrates. About 200 lakes have been treated with the herbicide nationwide, according to the APA. Several lakes in New York, Vermont and New Hampshire have used it.

The herbicide application is also below the state health department's levels of restriction for drinking water sources. The maximum concentration the park commission plans to use is 7.72 parts per billion, or about one drop of water in a 10,000-gallon pool. Drinking water restrictions kick in at 50 parts per billion, said Aaron Ziemann, with the APA.

Hall, who is also the water superintendent for Town of Fine in St. Lawrence County, said he would refrain from drinking the water from that area of Lake George after the herbicide applications.

In the written public comments submitted, the Jefferson Project conducted a model of Lake George pointing out concerns about the spread of the herbicide to other areas of the lake as water moves over time. The Jefferson Project is a modeling and mapping project of Lake George and is a partnership between the Lake George Association, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and IBM Research. In a written response, the park commission called it an “unverified map” that did not account for the herbicide's dilution, “the most basic tenet of modeling such an activity.” The watermilfoil will absorb the herbicide in about 2 to 6 hours, and what isn't taken up by the plants generally degrades in sunlight, Ziemann said.

As part of the applications the agency approved Thursday, the park commission will have to conduct post-treatment surveys and report results. That will include the herbicide concentration data and a plant survey.

Dana Holmlund contributed reporting.



Gwendolyn Craig

Gwen is an award-winning journalist covering environmental policy for the Explorer since January 2020. She also takes photos and videos for the Explorer's magazine and website. She is a current member of the Legislative Correspondents Association of New York. Gwen has worked at various news outlets since 2015. Prior to moving to upstate New York, she worked for a D.C. Metro-area public relations firm, producing digital content for clients including the World Health Organization, the Low Income Investment Fund and Rights and Resources Initiative. She has a master's degree in journalism from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. She has bachelor's degrees in English and journalism, with a concentration in ecology and evolutionary biology, from the University of Connecticut. Gwen is also a part-time figure skating coach. Contact her at (518) 524-2902 or gwen@adirondackexplorer.org. Sign up for Gwen's newsletter [here](#).

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Comments



Todd Eastman says
April 14, 2022 at 8:48 pm

Dan Wilt, Art Lussi, Ken Lynch, Matt Tebo, Brad Austin and Joe Zalewski are without the education needed to perform their appointments to the APA...

... the Park is without sophisticated leadership.

Reply



Al West says
April 28, 2023 at 11:11 am

Far more research is needed before applying this product to Lake George, Lake Luzerne, and other Adirondack lakes. I agree with Todd Eastman regarding the qualifications of APA members.

The Adirondack Park Agency should be disbanded, with numerous bad decisions on policy. Also the Adirondack Council should butt out.

I don't trust DEC, and I surely would not drink the water from Lake George. Far too much politics at play here and not enough science.

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