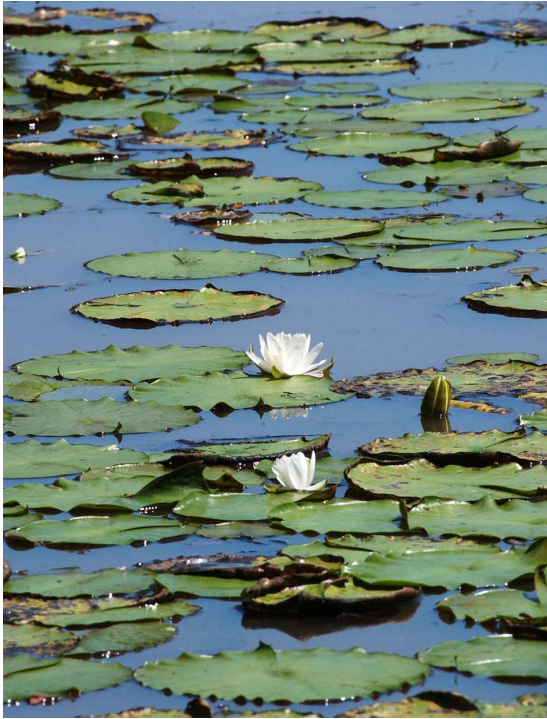


JACKSON COUNTY OCTOBER 17, 2015**Lake George: Twin lakes, many unanswered questions**

BY KAREN NELSON

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o the public two key documents from a proposal to create large lakes just

amental look at how to create 3,000 acres of lake and what that will do to the region. The lake is a dream many in George County have held for years, and Pat Harrison Waterway District is offering to manage it. Jackson County leaders are supporting the concept. The documents are part of the application for corps approval needed if the project is to go forward.

But people who want a wild Pascagoula River are asking, "Where's the need?"

The comments are rolling in -- 300 halfway through October. The comment period ends Nov. 4, and seeing that the interest and momentum caused the corps to keep the comment period open a month longer, considerably more are expected.

From the information now on the corps website, a state senator is raising questions about the implications of the project, and he wants to know why the state is funding any part of it. The Port of Pascagoula, although cooperating with Jackson County's wishes, says it's not pushing the project as an industrial water solution.

The Corps of Engineers notes the documents now online are only part of the picture and said there's a long process ahead before a decision is made to stop it, permit it, modify it or order more study. Though it is the lead agency, it still cooperates with other federal and state agencies in the decision.

CORPS OF ENGINEERS WEBSITE Even the staunchest supporters expect no less than for the corps to order an environmental-impact study, which can take as long as two years.

But George County is in it for the long haul, spokesman Kenny Flannigan told the Sun Herald. After all, it's been 15 years since the Legislature first gave permission to borrow \$3.5 million to study the idea of a lake in the county.

The proposal is to build two lakes as a drought-control measure, to supplement the Pascagoula at low times. The river did drop in 2000 to the point water was needed from a Pat Harrison reservoir upriver for Jackson County industry. It was low three times in subsequent years, but only for one or two days each time.

What's being proposed

Sen. Brice Wiggins, R-Pascagoula, said he wonders why the project is really being proposed. He said he read original statements about the reasons and "things aren't adding up."

The application characterizes it as a project the Port of Pascagoula needs and can benefit from, Wiggins said. The port supplies water from the river to industries in east Jackson County. But Wiggins said he's not hearing the port express such a need.

"They're not a front-runner pushing this," Wiggins said of the port. "My questions are, what is this project being done for, what are the benefits and to whom are the benefits going?"

He suspects it has more to do with who owns the land around the lakes, and about improving property.

He said people are telling him the Pascagoula River will be hurt. There is concern that damming the tributaries could impede the flow of water into the river system.

"We have to decide if the benefits outweigh the negative effects," he said.

He has called a hearing of the Senate Ports and Marine Resources Committee on Wednesday in Jackson. It's open to all.

Is it necessary?

The Pat Harrison Waterway District and the counties have used \$1.8 million in state bond money on the proposal, including the environmental assessment supplied to the corps. That's three years of studying the soil, river and creek flows and the climate. Mississippi State University gathered and analyzed the information.

The assessment, by the Pickering Firm Inc., is positive.

The documents, and the appendices that can be viewed only via a formal Freedom of Information request, are a mass of scientific-data that may overwhelm official reviewers and the public, one observer said. It projects that the future will bring more drought conditions. Most of it is good, raw science, he said, but he questions the conclusions and recommendations.

If this project is needed to save the river at low-flow times, many would ask, why hasn't government, scientific agencies or nonprofit organizations focused on South Mississippi and the Pascagoula and identified this type of drought-resistance project as an imperative?

The proposal is to dam Big and Little Cedar creeks less than three miles from the trunk of the Pascagoula River and create two lakes – the upper in George County at 1,715 acres and the lower with a spillway in north Jackson County and a 1,153-acre lake extending into George County. The two lakes would include about 1,200 acres of wetlands. Species that could be affected are the yellow-blotched map turtle, the Louisiana quill wort, the black pine snake and the gopher tortoise.

The support documents say the soils are sandy and that water likely will spread out in an area that is below ground but not in the lake.

Flannigan said that can be a good thing – it will raise the water table in George County and help the lakes themselves be more drought resistant. But Andrew Whitehurst, a water specialist with the Gulf Restoration Network, said the soil and geology sampling on this project show these soils are very sandy and allow enormous subsurface flows.

"They say it will help the water table," Whitehurst said, "yet they haven't proved the subsurface water will flow to the river. We want to know can it be accounted for or does it really help the water table, as they say it does?"

"This needs to be answered with more sampling and data."

Looking at details

Attorney John Ford, who has been involved with environmental issues on the Coast for years, has read data related to the project. He points out the 3,000 acres the lakes will cover are on land that collects rainwater for the Pascagoula formation – an aquifer that provides drinking water for Jackson County cities. It is not a closed sink, he said. The water from the lakes is likely to percolate down like a sink with the stopper out, he said, especially through some of the soils registered in the documents provided.

The environmental assessment found water can move through some of the soils at rates of 60 to hundreds even thousands of feet per day.

Coast Sierra Club chairman Steve Shepard questioned calculations about the water flow and volume demands on the river, even at critical low-flow times.

Drought stage at the Merrill river gauge, upriver from the lake project, is 917 cubic feet per second moving through the river. The port needs 34 cubic feet per second to feed industry such as the Chevron Pascagoula Refinery, Mississippi Power Co. and a half-dozen others.

Another way to put it is 592 million gallons a day coming down the river at Merrill is the Pascagoula River in drought, the Pickering firm calculated for the Sun Herald, and the port needs 22 million gallons a day.

The proposal talks about future needs, however, and offers to help keep the river able to supply 100 million gallons a day.

"If we're at 22 million gallons a day now, what's going to move in here that needs 70 million gallons a day?" Shepard asked. "That scares me to think."

A pretty lake

George County spokesman Flannigan said no single predominant land owner, family or group will gain from this project.

"No one will benefit more than anyone else," he said. "As far as the benefits go, I would argue that it is going to benefit and redefine southeast George County for years to come."

He said the vast majority of the land around both lakes would be private. He estimated 98 individual property owners directly affected, hundreds of private property owners indirectly affected and about 90 pieces of land would go underwater. The number of homes that would be inundated is in the single digits, he said.

He said recreation of any kind is secondary, including water parks. They haven't even planned where to put public boat launches. Fishing would be allowed. He said it would be a beautiful lake based on the topography and would look natural, not man-made.

He said the property owners will be understanding when or if there is need to drain water from the lakes to supplement a low Pascagoula River during drought.

"The environmental-assessment summary clearly shows the Pascagoula River, to some degree, is changing," Flannigan said. "The amount of water flowing down it is changing and those changes are going to have to be addressed at some point in the future. And we think our project is a viable answer."

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