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Leaders urge USGS to fund stream gages here

Schumer, Lake Advisory Committee

KIM SMITH DEDAM

WESTPORT — A race is on to keep stream-gage systems in place along Lake Champlain.

Congressional leaders, regional public safety officials and scientists are pressing federal authorities to find money for sustained river monitoring.

More than 30 U.S. Geological Survey stream gages (also spelled gauges) in New York state — including nine critical sites along Lake Champlain — are slated to shut down in March 2012, even though river and lake levels topped every historic mark this year.

The Geological Survey manages 7,800 gages across the country and plans to shut down 580 nationwide.

U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-New York City) says the cost-cutting decision defies logic.

"Removing stream gauges on flood-prone bodies of water is like rebuilding a home after a fire and switching off the smoke detectors — it makes absolutely no sense, especially after getting hammered by floods following tropical storms Lee and Irene," he said in a recent statement to the press.

DATA VITAL

Schumer appealed to Geological Survey Director Marcia McNutt in Reston, Va., in plain language earlier this month.

"The New York flood gauges that are set to be switched off cost only \$430,000 annually to operate, compared with an estimated price tag that reaches over \$1 billion in damages from tropical storms Irene and Lee. Our local communities use the data (from the gauges) to plan emergency evacuations, make watershed management decisions, and make smart decisions about rebuilding following flooding that destroys homes and businesses."

His plea seeks to keep New York's system among the funded.

ZERO FUNDING

An equivalent sense of urgency arose at a recent meeting of the Lake Champlain Citizens Advisory Committee, which reports from this side of the lake to the Lake Champlain Basin Program.

Comprised of scientists, river association directors, water specialists from the Department of Environmental Conservation, and environmental and local leaders, the group listened to the plight of doomed Geological Survey stream-gage tools.

Ward Freeman, director of the Geological Survey Water Science Center in Troy, said each site costs approximately \$16,000 to operate and monitor.

But an earmark from Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy that has funded them both here and in Vermont has dried up.

"There's zero funding as of Sept. 30, 2011," he told the Advisory Committee.

"We've said we will run them until March 1, using 'soft money' from elsewhere."

'BORDERS ON CRIMINAL'

Advisory Committee member Bill Wellman, vice president of the State Council of Trout Unlimited, said, "It borders on the criminal to let these go."

He also sent a letter to McNutt, asking her to put public safety first.

"Your mission tasks you to provide information to minimize loss of life and property and manage water and other natural resources. These water gaging stations are absolutely fundamental to that mission.

"Find the money," Wellman wrote. "I don't care where it comes from: Re-program lower priority programs, borrow it from likely neighbors, such as FEMA, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, or raid the coffee fund. These gages are essential to protect the lives and property of New York's citizens. Ward Freeman needs \$564,000, and he needs it now. That small amount will keep all of New York State's stream water gages operational until we can get monies released under the National Stream Flow Information Program that will restore a semblance of sanity to this crucial requirement."

EARLY WARNING

Every member on the Advisory Committee resolved to press federal authorities to reorder their stream-gage priority list.

"I don't think most people understand this is an early warning system for floods," said Brian Houseal, executive director of the Adirondack Council.

But Freeman advised that the gages aren't part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's tool kit.

"We receive one-time funding sometimes from FEMA," Freeman advised, "funding for repairs and installation, but no long-term support."

Stream-gage reductions are part of an overall \$21 million in budget cuts at Geological Survey.

But Freeman crunched numbers indicating even four hours of warning before a flood spares 10 percent of the cost of associated flood damage.

"It costs 3.5 percent of the \$4 billion spent on flood damage annually to fund the gage system nationwide," Freeman told the Advisory Committee.

The nine Lake Champlain gages in New York cost \$134,000 per year to maintain.

In addition to public safety, the gages provide data for flood maps, water-quality information, and help transportation agencies determine how to build and site bridges.

Email Kim Smith Dedam at: kdedam@pressrepublican.com