

County discusses use of Lake DeSmet water right



Bulletin photo

The receded shoreline of Lake DeSmet is visible on Sunday.

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For the first time since the Lake DeSmet Counties Coalition dissolved in 2012, Sheridan County is using its allocation of stored water in the reservoir, the lake's operations manager told the Johnson County Commission at its most recent meeting.

Paul Mavrakis, Lake DeSmet operations manager, said that at the time of the dissolution, Sheridan County was allocated 2,500 acre feet of stored water to be used at its discretion.

"Since that time, they haven't touched it until this year," Mavrakis told commissioners at their July 7 meeting. "This year with how dry it is, how the Lower Clear Creek Irrigation District people were not able to fully refill their water rights, they have now asked to start using that 2,500 acre feet."

In early July, Sheridan County started withdrawing 10 cubic feet per second, or 20 acre feet of water a day. Mavrakis clarified that 2,500 acre feet equals roughly 3,200 surface acres of water,

meaning Sheridan's allocation, if used in full, would draw the lake down less than a foot. According to the Wyoming Water Development Office, Lake DeSmet has 196,027 acre feet of active water storage and is fed by Piney Creek, Clear Creek and Boxelder Creek.

Sheridan County Commission Chairwoman Christi Haswell said that the county does not plan to use its entire allocation of water in Lake DeSmet. What it does release will be used for the town of Clearmont's greenspace, downstream irrigators and for fire, if needed.

"We worked with Paul to figure out something a little more conservative, because if we were to use all that and we don't get any rain and the lake doesn't get filled again, we wouldn't want to be out of all of that," she said in an interview.

Sheridan's use of its water allocation is part of a larger trend of water use in Lake DeSmet this year. Mavrakis told the Bulletin in June that the lake is

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“lower than it’s been in a long time.” The reservoir has still been able to accommodate irrigators and recreationists alike despite the low snowpack and drought conditions that have stressed other reservoirs and streams around the county.

Mavrakis told the commission that as of July 7, he has released 7,000 acre feet of water from the lake. Releases started on May 16. Last year, in total, the lake released 9,800 acre feet starting on July 3, he said.

“The lake is already lower than when we started to refill it,” Mavrakis said at the meeting.

Mavrakis told the commission at its meeting that the lake is at 4,608 feet of elevation. He said that the ideal water elevation at the lake is 4,613 feet.

“It’s likely going to keep going down at least another couple of feet this year,” he said. “It’s a great year to build a boat ramp on the north end, but it’s going to look vastly different out there this year.”

Johnson County commissioners questioned whether the county could and should charge Sheridan County a fee for Mavrakis’ time managing the water. Mavrakis releases water twice a week, a process that takes a few hours

to stabilize and adjust water. Releases benefit Sheridan County and the lake’s other water-right holders.

As part of the counties’ coalition dissolution agreement, Johnson County cannot charge Sheridan County for water storage, Johnson County Commission Chairman Bill Novotny said.

“So the taxpayers of Johnson County are incurring your time to monitor their water, report their water, maintain the lake, but there was no stipulation that we couldn’t charge them for your time to go out and release their water,” Novotny told Mavrakis at the meeting.

Johnson County and Prosecuting Attorney Tucker Ruby said that the agreement doesn’t specify that Johnson County cannot charge for administration of Sheridan County’s water storage at the lake.

“It really comes down to you guys,” Ruby told commissioners. “... This is an unprecedented year, it’s an unprecedented situation. It may benefit from some conversation commission to commission, or however you’d like to do that.”

Commissioners Jeff Shelley and Steve Kozisek agreed that it would be beneficial to meet with Sheridan County and said that if Sheridan County is selling water to users that Johnson County should impose a fee. Haswell said that Sheridan County is not charging users for the water and that she is grateful to be able to collaborate with the county on water use in Lake DeSmet.

The cities of Sheridan and Buffalo are working together on a Level II feasibility study on the viability of Lake DeSmet serving as an alternative regional water source for both communities.

“With the dry year and the Elk fire, water is always at the forefront, but especially this year