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Ryerson lake now a mudhole

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RYERSON STATION - A large, flat expanse of brown mud scattered with pieces of driftwood is all that's now left of Duke Lake at Ryerson Station State Park.

It had taken about 28 hours, starting about 1 p.m. last Thursday, to drain the 62-acre lake, an action deemed necessary by state officials concerned about an increase in the flow of water coming from a leak in the lake's concrete dam.

Park officials from Ryerson and other state parks, volunteers and supervised inmates from the county jail worked in the shallow water below the dam spillway Tuesday morning picking up fish that failed to survive the draining of the lake.

A consultant hired by the state will determine the cause of the leak at the dam and develop options for repairing it. Duke Lake is the centerpiece of the 1,164-acre park and is a favorite fishing spot for many local anglers.

"We recognize the lake's importance to the park," said Christina Novak, spokeswoman for the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. "Pending results of our investigation, our intention is to do whatever we can to restore it."

DCNR and state Department of Environmental Protection officials agreed to draw down

the lake by 10 feet last Thursday after a leak along a horizontal joint on the dam abutment on the Bristoria Road side of the dam grew worse.

"What we saw was over about a month's time, and (the leak) was getting progressively worse," said Jeff Anna, assistant regional manager for DCNR's Bureau of State Parks.

The increase in the flow during normal pool conditions made state officials concerned about what might happen at higher pool levels, like those that followed Hurricane Ivan last year, Anna said.

Though the 45-year-old dam was not in danger of failing, state officials decided to drain it as a precaution, he said.

Because the lake is only about 13 feet at its deepest, drawing down the water level by 10 feet left very little water in the lake. It was then decided to drain it completely, park manager Denise Miller said.

An undetermined number of fish that were in the lake died after they entered the shallow pool below the dam. "There wasn't enough water flow, and probably just too many fish for too small an area," Miller said. Many fish also lived and found their way to pools downstream, he said.

"This (the draining of the lake) was done as a precautionary measure to save human life and property. It's a shame the fish had to die, but it could have been worse," Miller said.

The state Fish and Boat Commission and DEP had issued an emergency permit to drain the lake. The need to drain the lake immediately because of a possible emergency prevented any effort to salvage fish in the lake, said Dan Tredinnick, spokesman for the Fish and Boat Commission.

"It's unfortunate, but unavoidable," Tredinnick said. But in regard to situation like this, "public safety comes first," he said.

Gannett Fleming Inc. has been hired to investigate the cause of the leak and to determine what can be done to repair the dam, Anna said.

"It could take several months to determine what we need to know," he said. "This is not something that is going to happen overnight."

Park officials would not speculate on the cause of the leak.

CONSOL Energy's Bailey Mine is currently mining in the area. The mine's longwall is mining about 850 feet away from the dam, which a company official said is far enough away not to affect the dam.

Once the cause of the leak is determined, a plan will have to be developed to repair it and money found to begin the project, Anna said.

Right now, however, officials don't know how long the process will take. Repairs could be as simple as grouting the leaking joint or as complex as rebuilding the dam, Anna said.

"We just have to wait for direction from Gannett Fleming," he said. Miller concurred.

"The process is in motion, but it's going to take time," he said. "We're not going to have an answer for a while."

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