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GREAT LAKES UNITED

November 23, 1992

TO: Great Lakes United Member Organizations

FROM: Terry L. Yonker, ^{TLY} Executive Director

SUBJECT: IJC Public Forums on the Lake Levels Reference Study,
November 30 through December 3, 1992

Over the past two years both Phil Weller and I have been actively involved in the International Joint Commission **Level Reference Study**. The purpose of the study was to look at ways to reduce damage due to fluctuating Great Lakes Water Levels (high and low). Many interest groups have a stake in this study, from riparians who own lakeshore properties that are subject to erosion to recreational boaters who are concerned about sufficient water depths. No matter what measures are selected to reduce damages due to fluctuating water levels (from massive water level control structures to benign shoreline land use controls), the environmental consequences will be significant. Reducing or eliminating natural water level fluctuations, for example, will destroy countless hectares of Great Lakes wetlands, fish spawning areas and wildlife habitat. Dredging activity will adversely affect wetlands and cause the re-suspension of toxic sediments. And on. And on.

Enclosed is an article written by Phil Weller that appeared in the Summer 1992 edition of **The Great Lakes United**. Phil's article does a good job of describing the issues in the debate about water levels regulation. Also enclosed is the latest **UPDATE** from the IJC Lake Levels Reference Study Board. **UPDATE** provides a brief (and inadequate) summary of the options that are being considered as recommendations to the International Joint Commission. Public Forums intended to elicit comments on the options from the citizens of the Great Lakes--St. Lawrence River Basin Ecosystem, are scheduled between November 30th and December 3rd, 1992. The locations and times of these forums are listed in **UPDATE**. Please take time to read the materials in the short time that is available and comment as you see fit at the forums near you.

THE CRITICAL FORUMS ON THE STUDY'S DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS WILL BE HELD BETWEEN FEBRUARY 22ND AND 25TH, 1993. GREAT LAKES UNITED WILL BE A MAJOR PARTICIPANT IN THE FEBRUARY FORUMS. MORE INFORMATION WILL FOLLOW BY EARLY JANUARY.

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Citizens Must Speak Up on Water Levels Debate

by Phil Weller,
GLU Executive Director

After six years of investigation, IJC's Water Levels Study Board will soon recommend whether artificial manipulation of Great Lakes water levels is possible, necessary, or ecologically sensible. The study has emphasized separating water level fact from fiction. However, the study has set the stage for a political struggle between some shoreline property owners, who want the lake levels controlled, and environmentalists and others who believe that control of shoreline development is the wisest way to avoid damage from fluctuating water levels. Over the next six months, Great Lakes advocates need to participate in and influence the decisions that will be made. If environmental voices are not heard in upcoming public hearings in November, the shoreline owners could hold sway in final decisions.

By March 1993, the Study Board will have answered these questions: Is it technically possible, economically feasible, politically desirable or ecologically sensible to construct control structures that would manipulate Great Lakes water levels? Or are there other ways we can reduce damage to buildings and property from naturally changing water levels?

Using a hydrologic model, the study examined what would happen if levels on the five Great Lakes were kept at or near the long-term monthly average. Preliminary results show that the water level changes in each of the connecting channels would fluctuate *much more* dramatically under such a scenario. In other words, lake levels would be stable but riverside residents in Montreal, Niagara River, Detroit, Windsor and Sault Ste. Marie would all experience *more* extreme water level fluctuations than now occur.

The study also examined a contentious issue critical to environmentalists--are water level fluctuations important for maintaining wetland area and diversity? The answer to this question is a resounding *yes*: Approximately \$200,000 has been spent studying this issue and the results are unequivocal. Water fluctuations are necessary to maintain the biological

diversity and area of wetlands. Each wetland responds somewhat differently to natural water level changes but, in general, wetlands need periods of high water to kill off woody upland plants that encroach into a wetland, and they need low water periods to allow seeds in the soil to germinate and grow. Stabilized water levels would damage both the biological diversity and area of Great Lakes wetlands already threatened by government neglect.

The study has also addressed the impact of high water levels on shoreline erosion. Shoreline property owners aim to reduce periods of high water levels because they believe that if water levels are higher, there is increased erosion. The shoreline owners are promoting the false belief that "higher water levels *always* increase erosion." The study concluded, however, that when water levels rise, erosion does *not* always increase.

The preliminary conclusions of the study angered some shoreline property owners who maintain that the conclusions are part of an ongoing government conspiracy, supported by "fanatical extremist environmentalists" to prevent them from receiving financial relief for erosion damage. Despite the facts brought forward by the study, a certain percentage of shoreline owners have shown they will never accept the study conclusions and will continue to promote their "right" to manipulate water levels throughout the lakes to protect their private property. It is for that reason that the coalition of interests, environmentalists, sportsmen, and Native people must speak out loudly and clearly during the upcoming public hearings.

The study has exposed the divergent and often conflicting interests that exist in the water level debate. At public meetings, shoreline residents from Lake Superior expressed anger about water levels being kept higher on Lake Superior as a way to regulate and stabilize levels on the middle lakes, Huron, Michigan, and Erie. Similarly, the people of Montreal and the St. Lawrence River have expressed concern about the river being used as a large drainage pipe that can be shut off and on to keep water levels stable in Lake Ontario.

No one wants damage to public and property in the Great Lakes to occur as it did during the high water years of 1985-86. But it is certainly not prudent to shift the impacts of water level changes to other areas of the basin and at the same time create irreversible ecological harm. *Making sure that property is not built on hazard-prone lands remains the most sensible and effective way to prevent damage from fluctuating water levels.*

Protecting private property built in hazard zones by regulating the lakes with publicly funded control structures is unwise and unfair. But unless the environmental community speaks up, that might be just what happens.

For updates on the study or Edgett, c/o Water Levels Communications Centre, Environment Canada, 867 Lakeshore Rd., Burlington, Ont. L7R 4A6, (416)336-4581/4629, or Anne Sudar, c/o Institute for Water Resources, U.S. Army Corps, Casey Bldg., Ft. Belvoir, VA 22060, 703-355-2336.

Public Forums on Water Levels Findings:

- Nov. 30--Thunder Bay, Ontario
- Dec. 1--Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Dec. 2--Sarnia, Ontario
- Dec. 3--^{Waterbury} Oswego, New York

Public Meetings on Final Report:

- Feb. 22--Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario
- Feb. 23--Chicago, Illinois
- Feb. 24--Buffalo, New York
- Feb. 25--Dorval, Quebec

