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Onorato, Altmire Launch North Park Ecosystem Restoration Project

Valve turning ceremony begins lake draining for sediment removal

McCANDLESS TWP., Pa. – Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato and U.S. Congressman Jason Altmire (PA-04) today launched the North Park Lake Ecosystem Restoration Project with a valve turning ceremony to begin draining the lake for sediment removal.

“North Park Lake is one of the crown jewels of the Allegheny County park system, and we’re excited to begin this major project to restore the lake to its rightful grandeur,” said Onorato. “During the past 70 years, the beauty and ecology of this body of water have been diminished due to a buildup of silt and sediment. We expect to remove about 350,000 cubic yards of sediment in this process, which will improve the recreational value of the lake for residents, as well as the water quality and habitat for fish and other aquatic life.”

Phase one of the restoration project will focus on the northern fork of the lake and will cost \$7.7 million. The County is providing \$2.7 million through a combination of capital funds and a \$400,000 grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The federal government is providing \$5 million for the project thanks to U.S. Senator Bob Casey and Congressman Jason Altmire, who have steadfastly supported the project and diligently worked to obtain funding for it.

“After years of work by federal and local officials, it is great to begin the restoration of North Park Lake,” said Altmire. “As a longtime resident of the North Hills, I know firsthand what a valuable asset this lake is to our community. These restoration efforts will help to return North Park Lake to its former glory and will help to ensure that local families can enjoy it for years to come.”

Draining the 60-acre lake is expected to take four to six weeks. It will take another four to six weeks for the lake bottom to dry before the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers can begin sediment removal.

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“The Corps is proud to be partnering with Allegheny County in this project to restore the lake for both the residents of Southwestern Pennsylvania and the wildlife that depend on a healthy ecosystem,” said Colonel Michael P. Crall, Pittsburgh District Engineer in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. “We look forward to beginning work on this long overdue project.”

While the lake bottom is drying, crews will prepare a 65-acre parcel near Wildwood Highlands as the collection site for the sediment. Top soil will be removed and set aside, and the lake sediment will be placed on the site. Once the project is completed, the top soil will be replaced.

The 65-acre parcel was used as a disposal site for fly ash for many years. The land has since been cleaned, and the lake sediment will help to further reclaim the property and return it to viable recreational use. The site’s close proximity to the lake is also reducing the restoration project’s transportation costs.

“This is another successful example of Allegheny County converting brownfields into greenfields,” added Onorato “This former industrial site will not only allow us to perform the lake restoration project, but it will also add acres of recreational and green space to North Park.”

Phase two of the restoration involves removing material from the southern fork of the lake and will cost an estimated \$5 million to complete. The cost of phase two will be covered by Allegheny County.

In conjunction with the start of the drawdown, the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) is removing season, size and daily creel limit restrictions for fishing at North Park Lake starting today, Sept. 8. The relaxing of fishing restrictions does not apply to Pine Creek upstream and downstream of the lake.

As the lake level draws down, smaller fish will migrate down Pine Creek with the water. Larger fish will move to deeper areas by the dam where the PFBC will conduct fish salvage operations to relocate the fish to Deer Lakes Park. Relaxing restrictions for anglers to harvest fish prior to salvage efforts provides additional recreational opportunities and will help to reduce the number of fish that will either be captured/transported or potentially stranded when the water level drops.

Individuals or organizations interested in assisting with formal fish salvage operations can contact the PFBC’s Fisheries Management Office in Somerset at 814-445-3454 or rlorson@state.pa.us. The Commission has not established a date for formal fish salvage efforts. Lake conditions will dictate timing, but it is projected to be in mid-October.

The lake is expected to be refilled by May 2011, at which time the PFBC will resume trout stocking and warmwater fish management for largemouth bass, channel catfish and panfish.

North Park Lake was completed in 1936 and was part of the original park construction project that began in 1927. The lake is the largest man-made lake in Allegheny County. The length of the lake's north fork is approximately one mile, and the length of the south fork is approximately three-quarters of a mile. The perimeter of the lake is approximately 3.25 miles. The widest point across the lake is approximately 600 feet. The paved trail around the lake is approximately five miles long.

Allegheny County operates nine public parks that span more than 12,000 acres and offer a wide array of sporting, leisure, cultural and entertainment opportunities. The Allegheny County Parks system serves to enhance the quality of life and well-being of citizens of Allegheny County and Southwestern Pennsylvania. Various seasonal and year-round programs, activities and amenities provide residents with educational and recreational opportunities, while also contributing to the economic vitality of the region. For additional information on Allegheny County Parks, visit www.alleghenycounty.us/parks.