

Meeting Minutes – Fish Presentation – **Healthy Waters, Healthy Fish**

Port Franks Community Centre, Friday, August 25th, 2023, 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. (noon)

Introduction by Lawrence Swift:

Lawrence Swift welcomed the community and introduced himself and the speakers (Jennifer Powell, Mari Veliz). He noted that the Ministry that is charged with investigation declined to come as their investigation is done.

Lawrence welcomed the community to the presentation. He introduced himself as a resident of Port Franks and an avid boater. He shared that, similar to other members in the community, he observed the fish die-off and had concerns. He called the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP), the Ministry responsible for investigating pollutions and spills. He also reached out to Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA).

Lawrence introduced the meeting speakers, Jennifer Powell and Mari Veliz.

Jennifer Powell is a PhD student, at the University of Toronto Scarborough, studying rare fish in the Lambton Shores area and took the time to note the extent of the fish die-off on the weekend of July 27 to August 1, 2023.

Mari Veliz is the Healthy Watersheds Manager at Ausable Bayfield Conservation. Since 2000, Mari has delivered a monitoring program and worked with communities for conservation of local rivers.

Presentations:

Jennifer Powell:

On the weekend of July 27 to August 1, 2023, Jennifer Powell documented the extent of the fish die-off and collected dead fish for analysis. She noted that, from what she personally observed, there were at least 11 different fish species involved in this event. The most abundant were large Redhorse and Channel Catfish, but she also saw Walleye, Smallmouth and Largemouth Bass, Common Carp, Bluegill and other Sunfish, Freshwater Drum (also called Sheepshead), Gizzard Shad, Rock Bass, and a large number of small-bodied fish.

She indicated that, due to the number of different species involved in this fish kill, this is unlikely to have been caused by a disease or pathogen as those typically only affect one species or a group of related species at a time. She summarized and catalogued all the photos of dead fish and potential discharge sources she observed or that people shared with her. This information was shared with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR), which has a fish contaminant program, and ABCA, and noted she is aware that it was also shared with the MECP. The dead fish she and another community member collected were given to the MNR and transferred to the University of Guelph for analysis and the results are expected in mid-September.

She provided the MECP Statement to the meeting:

“The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks takes all threats to the environment seriously and will continue to assess any claims of potential contamination into the Ausable River. At this time, the ministry has completed its assessment. The ministry did not identify any spills or other sources of contaminants that could have contributed to the die off. Based on how widespread the dead fish have been located, both in the Ausable River and along the shores of Lake Huron, and discussions with other agencies involved, it has been determined that the die-off is likely the result of naturally occurring conditions.”

In response to MECP’s statement, she said there is a lack of information on how the Ministry arrived at its conclusion. Also, she said the Ministry started its investigation as many as three days after the start of the event. She also had concerns with the wording of ‘naturally occurring conditions’.

Powell felt the term ‘naturally occurring conditions’ is inadequate and prefers the term ‘environmentally triggered’. She suggested that while this fish die-off event may have been triggered by environmental conditions (e.g., rapidly changing temperature and oxygen conditions due to high temperatures and heavy rains), the widespread habitat degradation of the aquatic system was the underlying cause behind the event.

Community Response:

The community expressed their concerns with the fish die-off. The community was also disappointed with the response of the investigating agencies, feeling it fell short of expectations given the magnitude of the event. Many of the 60 people, attending the meeting, voiced their concerns with the quality of the water for swimming, about runoff, including runoff from agricultural sources, and poorly enforced or lack of regulations.

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority:

Mari Veliz, Healthy Watersheds Manager at the ABCA, stated that her main purpose for hosting the meeting was to listen to the concerns of the community. She also wanted to let the community know what is happening to address aquatic conditions and acknowledge the gaps. She opened her presentation noting that there is a general understanding that the state of our aquatic ecosystems (declining fish, modification of habitat, water quality, etc.) needs to be improved. Mari introduced the different agencies involved when there is an acute event compared to more chronic habitat degradation. Mari outlined the actions that are being taken, e.g., Ausable River Action Plan but, that more needs to be done. Mari explained that a lot of her work is engaging agriculture, rural communities, and agencies to understand the balance with best practices, e.g., trees, cover crops, etc. Best practices must consider both ecological and economic impacts. Another important part of the work is to find the funds (i.e., write grant proposals) to support best practices in the rural (hamlets, villages, towns and agricultural) area. If people want a different response to poor aquatic conditions, they need to continue to stay engaged, convey what they value to their local, provincial and federal governments, and be responsible stewards on their own properties. Watershed health is a result of cumulative actions. Though the landscape has been modified by humans there are many

actions landowners and residents can take to improve the health of the watershed. In particular, she mentioned more native plants are needed to slow the water down. Veliz encouraged the community to continue advocating for their environment and direct their energy towards positive outcomes.

Follow-up:

Residents are encouraged to report all pollution and spills immediately to the provincial Spills Action Centre by phone or through the online portal:

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/report-pollution-and-spills#section-0>

It is also important to acknowledge that this is an important program with our local and provincial governments.

Support and take actions to reduce water runoff

Become involved with community level organisations.

Lawrence committed to communicating the results of this meeting to different levels of government.