Citizens' group sues DNR over shrinking White Bear Lake

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A citizens’ group has sued the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) over low water levels in White Bear Lake, arguing that the lake’s shrinkage is due to the agency’s approval of increasing water use by surrounding cities.

The White Bear Lake Restoration Association, in a suit filed Tuesday in Ramsey County, alleges that the DNR has violated state environmental standards in allowing surrounding cities to more than double their withdrawals from an aquifer beneath the lake since 2000. It asks the court to establish protected water levels for both the lake and the Prairie du Chien aquifer, which feeds the lake.

"We're going to have to get a lot smarter about water use," said Jan Conlin, an attorney for the citizens' association. "We're about to have 9,999 lakes if somebody doesn't do something about White Bear Lake."

DNR spokesman Chris Niskanen said officials had not had time to examine the lawsuit and had no immediate comment.

The suit is based heavily on a recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), which found that the lake’s steady decline in recent years is not due to drought, but to pumping from the aquifer beneath it.

White Bear has been at record low levels for much of the past month. It dropped more than 5 1/2 feet between early 2003, when it was last at its "ordinary high water" level, and Nov. 13, 2010, when it reached its previous record low. It rose somewhat last year, then receded again in recent months.

As a result, lakeshore residents have had to haul their docks and boat lifts, some of which are now hundreds of yards from the previous shore, to reach water. Some residents have even obtained permits from the DNR to mow the plants growing from the sandy lake bottom, which is now a sort of extended front yard.

Water activities cut back

Receding water levels have reduced fishing, boating and swimming opportunities, and closed a Ramsey County beach since 2009, the suit says.

"It's taken a lot out of us as a community," said Greg McNeely, one of five residents and business people who make up the group filing the lawsuit. "We're not suing just to sue someone. We want to fix the lake. It's a true asset for the community."

White Bear and surrounding lakes and streams are particularly vulnerable to nearby water pumping because the sandy soil beneath them allows surface water to drain readily into the aquifer, according to the USGS study.

Most of the recent pumping has been for residential use, while industrial and commercial use, including golf course watering, have remained steady. The study found that it would take annual rainfall of 4 inches above normal just to stop the lake's shrinkage.

Water use in the city of White Bear Lake has dropped 20 percent in the past five years. City Manager Mark Sather attributed that to higher city water charges and to an aging population with smaller households.

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