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By Marlene Lang

The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers has called for a re-gathering of a Sediment Task Force to address the threat to the Chesapeake Bay by sediment deposits at Exelon's Conowingo hydroelectric dam site reservoir near the mouth of the Susquehanna River.

Scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey say the sediment reservoir is filling fast and the issue must be addressed now. If a plan is not made for removal of sediment, the reservoir will reach a maxed-out "steady state" in 10 to 20 years, and sediment reaching the bay will increase drastically.

The day-long convening of experts and interested parties will take place in October 2009. Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper Michael Helfrich has been asked to address the group, which will include representatives from USGS, Pennsylvania DEP, the University of Maryland and the Susquehanna River Basin Commission.

The Conowingo reservoir retains sediment from the Susquehanna River watershed, the last dam site before the river meets the Upper Chesapeake Bay. The reservoir at capacity can hold 250 million tons of sediment and recent estimates predict full capacity could be reached in 14 to 20 years.

A catastrophic event could alter the reservoir's function, as happened in 1972 with Tropical Storm Agnes. During 4 days of rain, the Susquehanna River carried 4 *years* worth of sediment down from New York and Pennsylvania. When the flood waters reached the Conowingo Dam reservoir, the deluge scoured out another 10 years worth of pollutant-bearing sediment that had been trapped behind the dam – a total of 30 million tons.

Sediment has re-accumulated in the years since, and deposits at the dam today exceed those present when Agnes hit in 1972. Experts watching the situation wonder not if, but when, there will be a repeat of what is still considered the single most damaging event in recorded Chesapeake Bay history.

For this and other reasons, Stewards of the Lower Susquehanna (SOLS) has challenged Exelon Corp's seeking status of the generating site as attaining "Low Impact Hydropower" designation(LHI), and gaining the accompanying "green" LHI credits. Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper Michael Helfrich believes the sediment threat, along with the dam's contribution to the decline of the American eel and American Shad populations, constitute a "High Impact" on the environment by the plant. The dam blocks much of the young eels' upriver migration to what has been historically their largest habitat, upsetting the ecosystem function of the river and bay. (See full article on Eels on this Web site's Issues page.)

October's Task Force meeting will closely consider the situation and what should be the next steps taken on the sediment issue. The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers recently received \$57,000 seed money to bring together the task force partners again, in search of solutions. It is not the first look at the matter. Talks convened, then stalled in 2001. In 2007, Pennsylvania Rep. Todd Platts (R-York) wrote letters to the governors of Maryland and Pennsylvania, urging they pay attention to the situation. The Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper, member of the national Waterkeeper Alliance, lobbied at that time, also, in partnership with the Susquehanna River Basin Commission (SRBC).

Sen. Benjamin Cardin (Md.) has authored the Chesapeake Bay Ecosystem Restoration Act of 2009. The legislation seeks \$1.5 billion in new grant authority to restore the Bay's health, and Cardin is specifically asking for \$200,000 to address the sediment issue. The bill sets a deadline of 2020 for restoration of the Bay. Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper is currently seeking sponsors in the House to assure these funds get into the 2011 congressional budget.

Stay tuned for more updates on our website, and contact us to receive monthly updates from Stewards of the Lower Susquehanna at LowSusRiver@hotmail.com.