

Sunday, January 25, 2004

The Editor
The Salisbury Post
Salisbury, NC 28144

Dear Editor,

The January 25th front page article about the two men who nearly died in the mud of High Rock Lake should serve as a wake-up call to the community. While no one could reasonably excuse the actions of the two leading to their predicament, everyone should be alarmed and concerned at the condition of the lake that permitted such an occurrence.

High Rock Lake is again being drained, as it was in 2002, for no apparent benefit other than Alcoa's financial gains by power generation. The resulting mud flats are an invitation for disaster. What value can be put on the lives of the noble rescuers, who put their own lives in grave danger trying to rescue the mud entrapped men? The article makes it clear one of the deputies nearly found himself in the same situation as those trapped, and it's a wonder the airboat was able to slide across the mud. If the suction from the mud had stopped the airboat, how would the rescue been accomplished? Someone might well have died in that circumstance.

What if, rather than two men with law officers in hot pursuit, the entrapped victims had been a couple of lost, wandering children? Would anyone have been on their trail to initiate a rescue? The same could be supposed for any number of people who decide to explore the lake bed in its present condition or for untold numbers of animals who become trapped in the mud.

The Post article compared the mud to quicksand, and that's a very good description. What makes the lake bed so dangerous is the benign appearance to an uninformed observer. The mud tends to form a dry crust, with often several feet of muck below the crust. When one breaks thru the crust, the suction of the muck below is unbelievable, as many people who have lost shoes and boots can attest.

If High Rock Lake had been full Saturday night, none of our public servants would have been put in harms way. Likewise, a full lake would prevent the sort of possible disaster that can happen at any time in the exposed "quicksand". We need elected officials, governmental staff, and the public to take a real interest in High Rock Lake, and work to make it a real asset to the people of Rowan County by becoming proactive in the battle to keep the lake full on a year round basis. The relicensing procedures are being largely ignored, although this is the process that will determine the operational parameters for the lake for the next 30 to 50 years.

Alcoa recently issued a "press release" announcing the lake would be lowered for study of fish and aquatic habitat, stating the study was requested by state, federal, and non-governmental organizations (Issue Advisory Groups, IAG's) participating in the Federal Re-Licensing process for High Rock, Tuckertown, Badin, and Falls Lakes. The press release talked of a drawdown of 15-20 feet at High Rock. In truth, the actual "Study Plan" adopted and approved by the IAG called for mapping habitat at "High Rock with at least a 10ft. drawdown". As of Sunday morning the lake was more than 6 ft. below the IAG approved drawdown level (16 Ft. + below full) and Alcoa was forecasting a continued fall in lake level. Attempts by IAG members to find the reason for the extreme drawdown have been futile.

We saw the environmental, economic, and recreational impact related to the operation of High Rock Lake in 2001 - 2002. That makes it especially amazing we would be witnessing another discretionary draining of the lake in early 2004. Rowan County, please wake up and take an interest in what's happening at High Rock Lake!

Sincerely,

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