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Lake Lillinonah's debris a 'nightmare,' resident says

By Katrina Koerting

Scott Conant went to Lake Lillinonah to waterski with his wife on Friday morning when they encountered a blanket of wooden pieces across the lake's surface, forcing them to turn around.

A two-by-four piece of wood with nails got lodged in the watercraft.

"It was a real nightmare," said Conant, a Newtown delegate on the Friends of

"It is dangerous when they do this and it's exacerbated on a holiday weekend."

George Walker, of Brookfield, a member of the Friends of the Lake executive committee

the Lake's executive board.

Debris from the wooded shoreline fills Lake Lillinonah whenever FirstLight

Power Resources, which operates the lake, completes its mandated seasonal audit to ensure the power plant can meet its power generation. Residents around the lake know the tests have to be done, but want the company to do better at removing the debris and better time the tests.

They question why it was done just before the Fourth of July weekend, one of the busiest weekends of the

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year. The results of the audit rendered the lake unusable for a few days. They also said it created unsafe conditions.

"It is dangerous when they do this and it's exacerbated on a holiday weekend," said George Walker, a Brookfield resident who serves on the Friends of the Lake executive committee.

He said he saw a plane try to land on the lake last weekend but had to abort at the last minute because of the debris.

Residents noticed the debris on Thursday through Saturday morning. They said the lake had so much that boats and other smaller watercrafts couldn't use the lake until the wind cleared the debris to shore.

When the water levels rise as part of the test, the loose forest scraps are picked up from the shore and carried into the middle of the water. It's exacerbated by boats' wake and a summer wind that comes down from the hills.

"It has a tendency to gather," Walker said, adding the fields of debris are generally 100 feet to 200 feet wide and a quarter-mile long.

FirstLight is required to complete these audits once in the summer and once in the winter to determine a generator's ability to operate in seasonal conditions for a certain amount of time.

"Every generator must prove that it is capable of generating the amount of electricity it claims to be able to," said

Len Greene, FirstLight's spokesman. "In the case of Shepaug Station for example, we must prove that the station can generate a full 41MW of electricity during both the winter during cold temperatures and during the summer during hot temperatures."

The water level has to be increased to the maximum operating level to complete this, since lower levels produce less power and could affect FirstLight's performance in the capacity market. For Lake Lillinonah, that level is 200 feet about sea level, Greene said.

The testing window is set by ISO New England, which oversees the power grid FirstLight feeds into. Those windows are generally based on weather temperature forecasts.

"We were unable to perform the audit earlier in the window due to repairs being performed at the Derby Dam downstream of Shepaug, for which we retain water in both Lake Lillinonah and Lake Zoar," Greene said. "Given the drought conditions that we're currently facing in New England and the uncertainty of the amount of water that will be available in the river later this summer, we determined that the audit should be conducted during the window provided by the ISO last week."

FirstLight is required to do an annual cleanup after the test to remove the debris.

A skimmer boat helped for a bit, but Greene said it had to be retired in the 2018 season when it "suffered a catastrophic failure.

"FirstLight worked collaboratively

with the appropriate local, state and federal agencies to develop an updated debris management plan using pontoon boats and commercial divers," he said. "Local feedback on debris removal carried out under the updated management plan has been overwhelmingly positive to date."

Conant said they remove a lot considering it's just someone using a fishing net on a pontoon boat, but FirstLight should get equipment that's actually up to the task, such as a trash skimmer.

"You couldn't put a dent in it," he said of the current approach. "It'd be like emptying a swimming pool with a tablespoon."

He said the removal has been a problem since he moved to the lake 35 or 40 years ago. He said it's one of the challenges of being a man-made lake on a river for it to constantly catch debris when the levels are raised.

Members of the friends group plan to speak with FirstLight and elected officials to try improve the removal and be more aware of the unintended consequences of these tests.

"It's a feeble effort on the part of the power company to clean it," Walker said, adding performing the test just before the holiday is "nothing short of bureaucratic incompetence."

He said there's about 100 days in the boating season in the Northeast and the debris limits it even more.

"Every day is 1 percent less," Walker said. "These are precious days in New England."

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