

Opinion Piece

Gull Lake and Debwendon Inc. Oppose Proposed Gull Lake Quarry

January 18, 2022

The RM of St Clements is proposing to locate a new gravel quarry near Gull Lake, south of Stead Road. This new quarry would be located down gradient from a former landfill site that closed in the 1960s, and very close to both an ecological reserve and an interpretive trail. It is also very close to Gull Lake, a small, perched lake surrounded by about 300 cottages.

In 2019 Debwendon Inc. (DI) and the Gull Lake Ratepayers Association (GLRA) joined forces to voice concerns about gravel extraction and lobby for a Cumulative Impact Assessment of the Gull Lake area. DI has a mandate to protect the Brokenhead Wetland Ecological Reserve (BWER) which consists of two blocks, one south of Stead Road, east of Highway 59 and the other west of Hwy 59. GLRA represents the residents and cottagers and has expressed concerns about aggregate activities in the area to the Province and the RM of St. Clements for over six years. Then, last May, out of the blue, we learned of the new quarry proposed by the RM of St. Clements.

The wetlands in the 1240 ha ecological reserve may be at risk. This is because the Gull Lake gravel deposits form near-surface aquifers, which act as a reservoir for the underground springs which discharge in these wetlands. It is this mineral-rich water that sustains the wetland and provides the conditions for a rare calcareous fen. Continuing expansion of quarry development in this area could change the hydrology of groundwater and affect the wetland's ability to mitigate both drought and flooding in the area. Wetlands are also important for protecting and buffering Lake Winnipeg by filtering water and acting as a carbon sink.

Further, in 2012 Manitoba invested \$1M in resources to build a wheelchair accessible Interpretive Trail and Boardwalk adjacent to the ER. The rich biodiversity of plant life including many rare orchids and carnivorous plants is a popular destination for nature lovers and tourists, and Debwendon conducts many interpretive tours for schools, garden and nature clubs, etc.

With a history of gravel extraction since the 1950s Gull Lake is surrounded by numerous active, inactive, and abandoned pits. Resident concerns include impacts to the small lake (about one km² in area), and safety issues such as traffic from heavy gravel trucks, the noise of rock crushing, and dust. But it is the sheer area of devastation created by the accumulation of gravel pits that is truly shocking and that is the real issue. The new proposal is perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back.

In 1999 the Manitoba government denied the approval of an Environment Act License for a well to supply water to Gull Lake which was experiencing record low water levels. Located across the road from the proposed new quarry site, tests showed that the well would have affected the aquifer supplying the wetlands, and the License was denied. This aquifer runs below the proposed site as well.

The RM of St. Clements owns the land where they are proposing the new quarry. In theory there is no requirement to do a cumulative impact assessment (CIA), but they are required to register the quarry with the province and pay the rehabilitation fee. Nevertheless, there is nothing stopping them from conducting a CIA, and indeed because of the public outcry from Gull Lake cottagers and residents, consultants, hired by the RM to do a Community and Stakeholder Engagement, recommended just that.

In December Debwendon and the GLRA again expressed our opposition to the project to the Mayor and Council of the RM of St. Clements. However, if a CIA is conducted, we will be ready to work with all stakeholders and the Province to make sure that the CIA is thorough and of the highest quality. At the moment we are not sure what decision the RM intends to make.

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