

THE POLITICS OF WEEDS
- The opinion of Dennis Waslenchuk -

Winter drawdowns of Staffordville Lake were conducted yearly for decades, until the Schwanda button factory at the Staffordville Lake Dam went out of business in the late 1970s. In those years the water level was lowered 8 feet or more, which resulted in freezing and drying of the exposed lake bed. These drawdowns effectively controlled weed growth in the lake by killing roots and seeds in portions of the weed beds, and as a result the lake water was clear and the weed beds were much less prolific than they are today. In fact, winter drawdowns to control weed growth are touted as an essentially zero-cost technique, in Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection's 2005 guidebook "Nuisance Aquatic Vegetation Management".

During the button factory era, the dam was owned and operated by the factory owner. However, the dam ownership was transferred to the Town in the early 1980s, and the factory property was taken over by Tyco Corporation. The Town, not having personnel at hand to properly maintain and operate the dam as it is legally required to do, ceded the operation to the Tyco plant at Staffordville, whose interest was not in the responsible maintenance and operation of the dam but rather solely in assuring adequate supply of lake water for its industrial purposes (as was legally granted to Stafford Water Power Company in the early 20th century, which is now jointly owned by Tyco and other Stafford and Stafford Springs factories). Unfortunately, the lake drawdowns were discontinued once Tyco moved in and began controlling operation of the dam, and explosive weed growth and expansion of weed beds has followed.

Properly managed, winter drawdowns pose no conflict with adequate water supplies to TTM and Stafford Water Power Company members. The drawdowns can be conducted in full compliance with State regulations. Although Staffordville Lake Association has asked the Town to conduct substantial winter drawdowns year after year, Tyco and its successor TTM have opposed them without revealing any valid technical reason. The Town Administrations over the years have gone along with Tyco/TTM's inexplicable opposition, evidently afraid to put tax revenues from Tyco/TTM at risk should the Town see fit to responsibly manage the dam and lake. Politics in action! Of course, the Town Administration has the right to control the Town-owned dam and to conduct winter drawdowns so long as it does not interfere with TTM's and Stafford Water Power Company's adequate water supply from the lake (which eventually came under the jurisdiction of the State of Connecticut water diversion permit program).

However, a new spirit of cooperation has arisen during the past year, with the formulation of a comprehensive "Dam & Lake Management Program" (see related articles on Dam Management and Water Quality Monitoring). The "Dam & Lake Management Program," which is awaiting implementation by the Town of Stafford Board of Selectmen, lays out best management practices endorsed by the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP). As is practiced in dozens of other Connecticut lakes, substantial winter lake drawdowns are a crucial element in the practical and "zero-cost" management of weeds.