

Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District receives list of priority items from advisory committee

Topping the list is a complete drawdown of Lake Ocheda, which would require pumping.



A flock of seagulls fly over low water and mud flats at Lake Ocheda in this Oct. 1, 2020 file photo as the Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District worked to reduce water levels through a drawdown. The goal was to kill off the lake's high population of roughfish, which would have aided in reestablishing lake vegetation.

Tim Middagh/The Globe



By [Julie Buntjer](#), November 09, 2023 at 8:27 AM

WORTHINGTON — Members of the Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District received during its Tuesday meeting a list of five priority items its advisory committee wants the group to focus on in the coming years.

The top item on the list is to complete a full Lake Ocheda drawdown, shared Scott Rall, advisory committee member speaking on behalf of the group.

“There was overwhelming consensus among the advisory committee,” Rall said. “We encourage the watershed board to do a successful drawdown of Lake Ocheda. We started on this project seven or eight years (ago) and here we sit without a successful drawdown.”

It has become evident in the three-basin lake that a complete drawdown will not be possible without the use of pumps. After the watershed district renovated the dam on the south end of the lake’s west basin, they have gone through a few winters of removing boards on the dam to drain the lake as much as possible going into winter. The hope was for there to be a hard winter to freeze out the ponds or deeper puddles within the lake.

“We could take 50 more years waiting for the perfect storm,” Rall said. “The advisory committee recommends moving forward with Phase 2.”

The second phase would involve working with Ducks Unlimited on a shallow lakes plan for Lake Ocheda, and potentially seeking financial assistance from the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council.

“It would mean multiple pumping stations and spending north of \$2 million,” Rall said, adding he is willing to be actively engaged in building the request and testifying before the LSOHC in favor of the project.

I know for a fact (the LSOHC) has funded many, many projects exactly like this one. I think it would have a high probability of receiving funding with the proper request.

Scott Rall

Even if the watershed district decided to move to the next phase and seek funding for a pumping system, Rall said it could take a year and a half, minimum, to get the money.

“I know for a fact (the LSOHC) has funded many, many projects exactly like this one,” Rall told the watershed’s board of managers. “I think it would have a high probability of receiving funding with the proper request.”

No. 2 on the advisory committee’s list asked the watershed district to consider selling property it owns around Lake Bella, north of 330th Street and on both sides of Paul Avenue, to Pheasants Forever, who would, in turn, donate it as conservation land, Rall said.

“There’s expense to the watershed district,” Rall said of maintenance on the property. “I think it would be prudent to consider divesting yourself of that property ... so the land would ultimately end up in the hands of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife or DNR.

“(The land) either needs to be managed really good, or make it someone else’s responsibility,” he added.

As part of that request, Rall said the advisory committee also wants the watershed district to consider selling its 11.58 acres of land near Herlein-Boote Slough. This property encompasses the channel that was excavated in the 1980s to drain the slough into the Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District. The channel was later closed to keep Asian carp from reaching the Des Moines River Watershed.

The third request is for the watershed district to improve signage at boat access points within the district, asking boaters to clean, drain and dry watercrafts after leaving a lake to prevent the

spread of aquatic invasive species. The request was also made to make better or more prominent signs alerting the public to the presence of blue-green algae and potentially toxic algae blooms on the lakes.

“The watershed board needs to step up ... communication there so people know when they can utilize (the lake) or shouldn’t,” Rall said.



Southwest Minnesota commercial fisherman Scott Deslauriers (front left) and his crew transferred their catch to a storage net after the first pull on Lake Okabena in this Dec. 2, 2021 file photo.

Tim Middagh/The Globe

Fourth on the list was an encouragement to the district to continue to address carp populations in the watershed’s three lakes — Okabena, Ocheda, and Bella — and possibly step up efforts of carp removal.

Finally, the committee encouraged the watershed to promote the phasing out of surface tile intakes within the watershed district. This could be done through a cost-share program, Rall said, encouraging the creation of something like a five-year, low-interest loan program to encourage landowners to convert surface tile intakes to French drains or subsurface intakes.

Dan Livdahl said there are a lot of surface tile intakes in road ditches, but there hasn’t been a count or mapping of how many exist within the watershed district.

“Most townships are going to be happy getting the intakes out of the ditch,” said Paul Langseth, a supervisor on the Nobles Soil and Water Conservation District board and a township official.

Tom Ahlberg, a member of the advisory committee, said there has to be some incentive to get farmers to be able to make the change.

“Some people are not going to do what’s best for the community, regardless of what you offer them,” added Langseth. “The majority have taken out surface drains because of the benefits.”

OOWD Board Chairman Rolf Mahlberg suggested each of the suggestions made by the advisory committee be on a future agenda for further discussion.

“We’re not looking for any action now,” Rall said at Tuesday’s meeting. “We’ve transferred it from the advisory committee and now it’s in your intake basket.”

In other watershed business Tuesday, the managers:

- Learned that an easement for the watershed district’s planned water quality project on ISD 518 property along Crailsheim Road has been signed and recorded, and wetland restoration work has begun.

The project is estimated to take about 300 pounds of phosphorus out of the water and tens of tons of sediment could be settled out before the water reaches Lake Okabena.

- Was notified that the city of Worthington went around the Prairie View pond and completed the tree removal project.
- Learned from Administrator Dan Livdahl that no zebra mussels were found on public docks and private boat lifts removed from Lake Okabena this fall and stored at Sunset Park.
- Received a report on filter strip incentive payments made to landowners within the watershed district.
- Approved an after-the-fact permit for Kevin Donovan to complete a shoreline project that included riprap and shoreland area construction.