

Rebuilding a legend: AGFC renovates Lake Conway in Central Arkansas to bring back 75-year-old treasure

By The Fishing Wire

Lake Conway was built in 1948, and at the time was the largest lake ever constructed by a state wildlife agency. Now, after 75 years, this central Arkansas treasure is in need of rehabilitation.

The gates and spillway structure of this lake have long passed their useful life expectancy and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission is beginning to see failures at an increased rate, requiring multiple repairs within the last few years. Additionally, this structure requires manual operation of gates to maintain water levels in the lake during rain events.

Increased engineering knowledge and technology during the last 75 years has made it possible to replace the old gate system with a new design that will allow water to be released instantaneously over a spillway and accommodate rising lake levels. This eliminates the need to manually raise and lower gates to regulate different flows of water and eliminates moving parts that require maintenance.

With the new spillway, the need for the annual winter drawdown to accommodate heavier rainfall will be eliminated, allowing the use of much more lake area from November through March.

The replacement of the water-control structure offers the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission a prime opportunity to enhance Lake Conway and prepare the lake for another 75 years of fantastic fishing opportunities in the heart of Central Arkansas. However, it will re-



quire the lake to be drawn down completely and remain dry for up to five years to complete all aspects of the proposed renovation.

The recently completed renovation of 341-acre Lake Poinsett near Harrisburg currently stands as the largest-scale complete lake renovation the AGFC has completed in its 109-year history. The proposed renovation of the 6,700-acre Lake Conway will eclipse that mark and stands to be one of the largest fisheries projects the agency has embarked upon since the same lake was originally created.

Benefits of an Extended Drawdown

Massive amounts of silt and sediment have built up on the lake’s bottom during the last 75 years. Completely natural in many fertile fisheries, this byproduct of aging has taken away as much as 3 feet of depth in portions of the lake and smothered much of the lake’s prime fish spawning habitat. Many boat house owners in the northern quarter of the lake cannot access their boathouse by water any longer because of this buildup.

An extended drawdown will

allow the lakebed to dry out and compact, regaining as much as 1 ½ feet of depth in some locations. Once exposed to air, organic matter trapped in the sediment will decompose and be recycled into the system through the growth of grasses, vines and other vegetation.

Drying of the lakebed and compaction of the silt also will promote more hard bottom areas and vegetation that is used by fish for spawning habitat. While the lake is full of stumps, more complex cover offered in natural woody vegetation serves much better as shelter for baitfish and young sportfish. Additionally cypress trees that still live in the lake’s water should see a boost in growth from the temporary reprieve from flooding. This growth also will offer much more complex cover for fish than bare trunks and root systems.

Clean Slate

Lake Conway is in a very productive watershed, but the loss of spawning habitat and lake depth prevent the lake from living up to its true potential. This fertility has led to a large amount of non-target “rough” fish such as gar, buffalo and bowfin in the lake. The 2019 flood of the Arkansas River may have intensified this problem when the river flowed backward over the gates of the current spillway and allowed an open door to more rough fish, which may have included invasive carp species. Few new reservoirs are being built, both in Arkansas and across the country, so drawdowns for renovations provide a rare opportunity for biologists to hit the “reset” button on a fishery. Draining the lake will enable the AGFC to start with a clean slate and focus as much of the lake’s nutrients as possible toward desirable species. The lake’s fertility will then allow the fish to grow quickly, promoting a fast recovery post-renovation.

Creating Cover

Natural cover won’t be the only thing building momentum in the lakebed. The AGFC plans to intensify complex cover for fish in key areas of the lake, which includes such actions as adding gravel spawning beds to increase

productivity for bream and other sunfish, planting additional cypress trees to create more cover and building artificial structures and brush piles.

A similar project was recently completed at Lake Poinsett in northeast Arkansas. During that renovation, 174 habitat sites were established in the 341-acre lake. AGFC plans to match that density of fish habitat sites in Lake Conway, which would bring the total to well over 3,000 fish attractor locations in the lake once the renovation is complete.

Access Increases

The renovation also will enable fisheries personnel to work on additional infrastructure projects to make the fishing experience even better for Lake Conway anglers. Establishment of boating lanes through Conway’s stump-filled waters will be a priority for staff when water and soil conditions allow. Staff also will continue replacing the older steel boat lane markers with higher visibility markers for increased navigation safety. Increased ease of boating will enable Lake Conway to be much more attractive to anglers who formerly wrote off this fishery as “Old Stumpy.” Boat ramps also will be improved as the AGFC will work to dredge channels near the ramps,

enhancing access points. Additional launching and parking capacity at a few current facilities are planned, and more improvements may be possible with additional funding.

In addition to adding boat launching facilities, the drawdown will allow the AGFC to increase angling opportunities for bank anglers by improving existing bank fishing accesses and exploring additional opportunities to access the lake shore by foot.

Cleaning the Shoreline

AGFC staff also plan to remove many structures that have fallen in a state of disrepair that are on state-owned property during the drawdown. Many boathouses and piers that have been abandoned or left unmaintained by former landowners, creating safety hazards around the lake’s perimeter will be demolished and usable materials will be incorporated into new fish attractors.

The cleanup not only will take place along the shore, but also among the thousands of trees filling the lake. Workers will be able to remove decades of passive fishing devices and illegally placed metal stakes in the lakebed that have accumulated over the years.

Tennessee Highway Patrol graduates 28 state troopers from sports-Military page 2

something far bigger than yourself,” said Colonel Perry. “Today, you represent the Tennessee Highway Patrol while in uniform and out. You will be held to a higher standard – not only by the public but also by your peers and your leaders. The THP is in the business of providing a service. Every time you put on the uniform, take a moment to remember that service is at the heart of being a Tennessee State Trooper. You no longer serve only yourself; you serve the citizens and visitors of the state of Tennessee. Be the optimists who find the opportunities in every

challenge, and let your positivity inspire others to do the same. Together, we can build safer, stronger, and more compassionate communities.”

Trooper Bobby Rogers was named the top trooper cadet and was presented the Trooper Calvin Jenks Memorial Award for Excellence for achieving the overall highest average. The award honors the late Trooper Calvin Jenks, who was killed in the line of duty in January 2007.

The Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security’s mission is to serve, secure, and protect the people of Tennessee.

Catch Bassmaster College Classic coverage live from Kansas Sept. 29-October 2

JUNCTION CITY, Kan. — Fishing fans and college sports enthusiasts alike will have three days to catch live coverage of the Bassmaster College Classic Bracket presented by Lew’s on Milford Lake from Junction City, Kan., Sept. 29-Oct. 2

The event pits the season’s eight top college anglers against one another for a coveted spot in the 2024 Academy Sports + Outdoors Bassmaster Classic presented by Toyota. On Day 1 of the event, all eight anglers will compete individually to determine seeding and set the bracket for head-to-head competition. FS1 kicks off a day of college sports with morning action from Day 2 of the tournament beginning at 7 a.m. CT. Bassmaster College Classic Bracket LIVE will feature real-time coverage from every boat on Saturday and Sunday as anglers battle to advance. Continuing coverage of the tournament each afternoon and on Monday can be streamed on Bassmaster.com and the FOX Sports digital platforms.

The 2023 Bassmaster College Team of the Year — Easton Fothergill and Nick Dumke from the University of Montevallo — automatically punched their ticket to the College Classic

Bracket to compete alongside the Top 3 teams from the Strike King Bassmaster College Series National Championship presented by Bass Pro Shops in this individual, elimination-style tournament.

“When this all happened, my first thought was, ‘Oh my gosh, I put all this work in and finally made it to the Bracket, and I’m not going to be able to fish it,’” Fothergill said. “I was really down in the hospital thinking about it. But, luckily, I came through and all the doctors came together and got me feeling up to it.”

Joining Fothergill and Dumke will be national champions Hayden Marbut and Tucker Smith from Auburn University, Levi Mullins and Matthew Cummings from Bethel University and a second Montevallo team, Brody Robison and Jack Alexander.

This is the second trip to the College Classic Bracket for Smith, who finished second by just 3 ounces in 2021.

The event is being hosted by the Geary County, Kansas Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Connect with #Bassmaster on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok.

Proclamation for National Hunting and Fishing Day in Arkansas

WHEREAS: Arkansas has a rich and storied tradition of hunting and angling dating back to the early 1800’s and carrying forward to this day;

WHEREAS: Hunting and angling continue to be an integral component of the cultural fabric of communities throughout the state and over recent years have offered a growing number of participants an opportunity to connect with nature on a personal level while simultaneously providing food security, a sense of self-sufficiency, and health benefits;

WHEREAS: Arkansas’ sportsmen and women were among the first conservationists to support the establishment of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission to conserve fish, wildlife, and their habitat; through their license fees Arkansas hunters and anglers have funded state efforts to provide for healthy and sustainable natural resources;

WHEREAS: Upon realizing license fees alone were insufficient to restore and sustain healthy fish and wildlife populations, sportsmen and women supported self-imposed excise taxes on firearms and ammunition, fishing tackle and fuels to raise additional conservation funds;

WHEREAS: The efforts of Arkansas Game and Fish Commission continue to be funded, in part, by sportsmen and women, through this American System of Conservation Funding – a “user pays – public benefits” approach which is widely recognized as the most successful model for funding fish and wildlife management in the world;

WHEREAS: In 2022, Arkansas’ sportsmen and women generated over \$56,000 through this system to support the conservation effort of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission;

WHEREAS: 867,334 hunters and anglers support the state’s economy through their spending, contributing to the \$3.5 billion spent on outdoor activities in Arkansas last year;

WHEREAS: According to 2022 data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, sportsmen and women spent more than 38 billion on hunting, fishing, and recreational shooting nationally, which does not include spending on items such as trips and travel or license fees which were necessary for their participation. This spending helped fuel the outdoor economy, which comprised 2.4 percent of Arkansas’ GDP that same year; and

WHEREAS: National Hunting and Fishing Day was established in 1972 to celebrate and recognize hunters and anglers for their immense contributions to fish and wildlife conservation, and to our society.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, SARAH HUCKABEE SANDERS, Governor of the State of Arkansas, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the laws of the State of Arkansas, do hereby proclaim September 23rd, 2023, as

“NATIONAL HUNTING AND FISHING DAY IN ARKANSAS”

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Great Seal of the State of Arkansas to be affixed this 12th day of September, in the year of our Lord 2023.

Watch for The Mid-South Tribune’s Education & Economics Special Edition.

Email news and photos to MSTnews@prodigy.net

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Also, watch for The Mid-South Tribune’s 29th Annual Black History Month Special Edition in February 2024

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