

PA House Majority Policy Committee Meeting

Re: Francis E. Walter Dam Re-Evaluation Study

March 18, 2021 9:30 am – 12:30 pm

Remote Testimony via Microsoft Teams

Testimony of Jerry McAward, President, Jim Thorpe River Sports, Inc., Northeast PA Kayak School, Inc., and Lehighton Outdoor Center, LLC

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Chairman Causer, Representative Heffley, and Members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to speak before you on this important matter. There are diverse opinions on how best to plan for the future of the Lehigh River, and the future of operational enhancements of the Francis E. Walter Dam. The Lehigh River has its origins entirely within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As such, it is OUR resource... so this matter should be of grave concern to your constituents and to our fellow citizens of Pennsylvania.

The Lehigh River attracted me from my home in New York, first during a college club rafting trip in 1979. I could not believe my eyes when I first saw the beauty of the Lehigh River Gorge... all just over two hours west of Manhattan. Soon I was a regular guest of Pocono Whitewater. In 1984, I trained and became a river guide for them. In 1986, I gave up a perfectly good career in NYC. I landed in Jim Thorpe in 1987 to take a job as their guides and operations manager. In 1999 I opened my Northeast PA Kayak School. In 2008 I purchased Jim Thorpe River Adventures. In 2018, at 59 years old, I went all-in, and opened our new home, a \$2.5 million facility on 8 acres called the Lehighton Outdoor Center in beautiful, downtown Lehighton, PA.

The Lehigh River and its waters run through 42 years of my life. During those years I have tried to be a good steward of this river. I have been a guest, a guide, a manager, and now the owner of three businesses. I am honored to call 110 people within my three companies my co-workers. These are companies of regular people doing extraordinary things, working together to provide a high-quality outdoor adventure recreation experience for tens of thousands of people each year. Each of my fellow rafting companies have similar, and even longer histories of doing the same thing. Together we have employed thousands of people over three

generations. Together we have provided the necessary equipment, the transportation, and the expertise that have allowed millions of people - from all surrounding states as well as our State of Pennsylvania - to enjoy the Lehigh River experience.

River Outfitters exist anywhere in the world as businesses that allow people to reach and enjoy magical places – like our Lehigh River. People come here to create memories. They come for their health and well-being. They come with their families, friends, and co-workers. They come because they trust us. They come to Pennsylvania. These visitors – many of which are out-of-state residents - spend their hard-earned disposable income right here in Carbon, Monroe, Wayne, and Pike Counties. They trust in making memories here in Pennsylvania.

The Army Corps of Engineers' Francis E. Walter Dam has a primary mission of flood control. I live in the flood plain, so I'm pleased they've got my back on that one. Since the early 1980's, they have acted as reasonable partners with a number of interest groups. They manage this Pennsylvania water resource in a manner that preserves their flood control mission while creating opportunities for personal and commercial downstream recreation. The current Francis E. Walter Dam Flow Management Plan is a years-long accomplishment and fine example of compromise that has benefitted all user groups – anglers, private whitewater enthusiasts, commercial rafting companies – as well as hundreds of thousands of visitors seeking outdoor adventure. This plan works, and will work long into the future, with your help.

The Francis E. Walter Dam Re-Evaluation Study worries us deeply for several reasons.

- 1) January 9, 2020, over 800 people crowded into the public meeting about this Study - with hundreds turned away - to offer their support to protect the recreational release program that's been developed here over the past 2 decades. These same people are still watching and listening - and are as passionate about the future of the Lehigh River today as they were 14 months ago.
- 2) In an Army Corps Zoom meeting earlier this year, no one of authority was willing to say with certainty that the recreational release program will be protected during the course of this Feasibility Study. This concerns us deeply. The fact that the PA DCNR and Hickory Run/Lehigh Gorge State Park were excluded from being major partners for this study, excluded from

having an official role at the January 9, 2020 meeting, excluded from the Zoom meeting, AND were excluded from the kick-off meeting at the dam last fall – concerns us. The fact that whitewater recreation enhancement isn't even mentioned as a possible objective of this Feasibility Study... concerns us. The fact that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers says it is going to "TRY" to do no harm to whitewater recreation, concerns us deeply.

- 3) It feels like whitewater recreation is being "managed" by omission in this case. Were it otherwise, Downstream Recreation be on the same list with In-Lake swimming, Downstream Fishing, and all the other recreational opportunities for which the Feasibility Study seeks "ENHANCEMENTS."

**Why are we not on that list?**

Chairman Causer, Representative Heffley, and committee members, you are respected members of our state government. I speak for many when I say we worry about our future when a time-tested, 40+ year-old downstream recreation economy can have its future challenged by far-away, out-of-state needs.

I ask you as our elected PA Representatives to fully embrace the idea that the Lehigh River is an invaluable resource, now and in the future, and it belongs to Pennsylvania. I ask you to recognize that this resource - and the recreation economy that thrives because of it – is being threatened by powerful forces concerned with future municipal water supply. For my fellow citizens, employees, and business owners of Carbon County and the Pocono Mountains, I ask you to defend us against any change that would negatively or adversely affect this recreation economy. I ask you as a citizen, and a member of a very large community of concerned people, to see to it that Downstream Recreation is mentioned as a full, published objective of the Francis E. Walter Dam Re-Evaluation Study.

We need to be futurists here. What will our municipalities require 10, 25, 50, or 100 years from now? What will in-lake recreation, downstream recreation, and fisheries needs look like 10, 25, 50, or 100 years from now? Let's not trade away options today that we'll need to preserve decades from now. Protect our future by guaranteeing that Downstream Recreation is an official study parameter. Please.

Thank you, one and all, for the opportunity to testify, and for your continued leadership of the fine State of Pennsylvania.