

Low water hampers use of Connecticut River

Jeopardizes potential river rescue response

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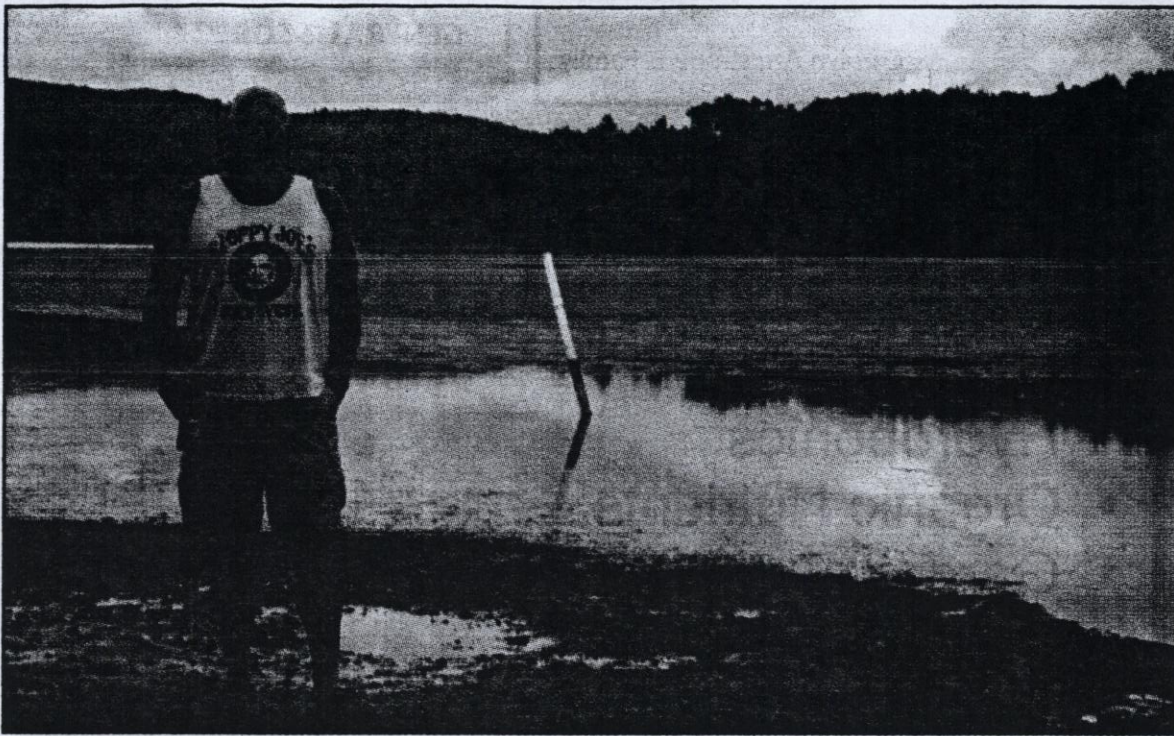
TURNERS FALLS — Shallow water on the Connecticut River annoyed boaters and worried emergency responders Sunday.

The Northfield Dive and Rescue Team's annual lobster bake fundraiser brought together both categories of river-users at the Turners Falls Rod and Gun Club.

The club facility, at 15 Deep Hole Drive on the bank of the Connecticut River, includes two docks for members and a slope cleared for use as a boat ramp.

Much of the slight cove by the club had the look of a mossy field Sunday morning and afternoon, with aquatic plants and normally submerged stumps left high and relatively dry.

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Photo/Chris Curtis

Turners Falls Rod and Gun Club member Bruce Merriam of Turners Falls stands in front of the channel from the club boat ramp to the Connecticut River. Unusually low water blocked members from using the river Sunday.

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■ Low: Down 5 feet

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Water remained in the channel but club member Bruce Merriam said his power boat could never cross the shallow stretch to the river.

Merriam, of Turners Falls, blamed FirstLight Power Resources, the utility operating the nearby dam.

"They ruined one day of boating for me and boating season is short in New England," Merriam said.

Merriam estimated the water level was down about five feet, not the lowest he had seen in his years with the club but the lowest for the year.

Rescue response time

Bill Ryan of the Northfield Dive and Rescue Team said the low water could slow a potential rescue.

"It's not like we couldn't access the river but it would slow things down," Ryan said. "When you do a water rescue timing is everything, so every second counts."

Ryan said the ramp is one of two used by his group, the other being the public boat ramp in Gill.

Turners Falls Fire Capt. Leon Ambo said his department usually launches their rescue boat from the club ramp and was not confident the boat could clear the channel.

Ambo said he had seen the water level on a Sunday afternoon news broadcast, and had never seen the water so low.

"After seeing that on the news, I probably would head over to Gill," Ambo said. "If it was an emergency call, I don't think we would try it."

By 8 p.m., Ambo said the water level had risen sufficiently to launch.

Ryan said water levels are significantly lowered several times a year and the low levels have so far never coincided with one of the group's dozen or so annual rescue responses.

Ambo and Ryan said the utility does not notify them when lowering water levels via the power canal or dam, and Ambo said he does not believe the company has any obligation to do so.

FirstLight representatives could not be reached for comment Sunday.

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