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A dam separating Alamoosook Lake and Narramissic River. Verso Paper Corp. operated it, along with two other dams, until it sold the Bucksport paper mill to a Canadian scrap metal recycler last week. Some individuals and groups now wonder what will become of the local water system.

PHOTO BY CHARLES EICHACKER

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Mill closure churns up questions about local waterways

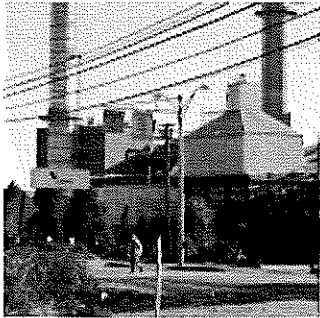
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February 6, 2015 by Charles Eichacker on Business, Environment, News, News-Featured       

BUCKSPORT — Until Verso Paper Corp. closed the local paper mill last December, the 85-year-old facility was, at least in economic terms, the heart of the region.

Over 500 jobs were lost when its paper machines went offline. With Verso covering 44 percent of municipal property tax, residents and officials are now bracing for a hit.

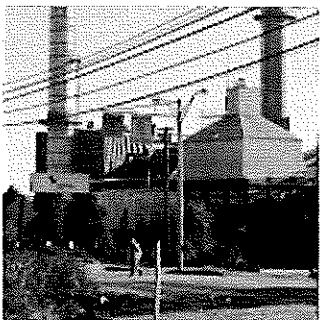
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But the closure has affected Bucksport and surrounding towns in quieter ways as well. The plant depended on a steady diet of lumber, gas, clay and other resources that came via trucks, trains and utilities.

Most dramatically, perhaps, Verso drew about 12 million gallons of water — enough to fill 18 Olympic-length swimming pools — from Silver Lake daily.

Now, a Canadian scrap metal recycler, AIM Development, has bought the property. The mill is shuttered, and only a power plant still operates on the site.

According to Jim Brooks, Verso's environmental manager who is working for AIM during the transition, the current operation requires only 2 million gallons of water per day.

That drop leaves some area residents and officials wondering: Absent papermaking, what's going to happen to the local water system that no longer has 10 million gallons of water coursing through it?

When the mill was running, the majority of that water went to processing pulp, Brooks explained. It drew the water from a dam on Silver Lake, which also supplies Bucksport's drinking water through a separate intake system operated by Maine Water.

For several decades, the mill's owners operated dams on Alamoosook Lake and Toddy Pond in Orland. As part of a lake level management plan that aimed to keep water levels steady, it would replenish water in Silver Lake by pumping it from the Narramissic River, just below the Alamoosook dam.

It also released water from the Alamoosook and Toddy Pond dams as needed to support the wildlife in those areas and the recreational needs of those living on the lakes.

One local worry is that AIM, without an economic incentive to operate the dams, might petition the Maine Department of Environmental Protection for the right to abandon the infrastructure or try to get the town of Orland to take ownership of them.

In 2011, the town of Orland reluctantly agreed to take over another dam in its village after Verso announced it was no longer interested in operating it.

A town committee has commissioned a feasibility study of that dam and will soon ask residents to vote on whether to demolish the dam, according to committee chairman John Barlow.

Another concern, according to Chris Dadian, vice president of the Toddy Pond Association, is that AIM might not maintain the water levels as Verso had, endangering the loons, alewives and other species sensitive to their fluctuations.

Alewives come upstream via ladders at the Alamoosook and Toddy Pond dams, while birds regularly nest on the lakes' banks.

"In spring and fall and months of heavy rain, water levels tend to rise very quickly, endangering the loons that nest just a few inches above the water line," Dadian said, emphasizing that he still hasn't collected much input from fellow association members, some of whom only spend summers in Orland and the other towns on Toddy Pond.

A number of local businesses and operations, such as Alamoosook Lakeside Inn and Craig Brook National Fish Hatchery, also have a vested interest in the lake levels.

Representatives from the Toddy Pond and Alamoosook Lake associations have written letters to several towns, including Bucksport and Orland, requesting they be apprised of any developments related to the dams.

A more immediate nuisance has been created for the Orland Fire Department, which had permission to top off its water tanks at a pressurized pumping station that Verso used to get water from the Narramissic River to Silver Lake.

They no longer have that access, Chief Bobby Conary explained, so a separate fire truck must now be used to pump water from water supplies into their tanker. That means the department now can't top off water supplies on the way back from fighting fires or make courtesy deliveries to residents filling wells or pools.

"It's not going to stop us from responding to a major house fire," Conary said. "It's more just a major inconvenience."

AIM officials didn't respond to requests for comment at the time of publication. In court filings, they have said they're considering demolishing the Bucksport mill and replacing it with a metal scrap yard.

They've not publicly expressed any intent for the dams, but at least in the short term, there doesn't immediately appear to be cause for locals to worry about water levels.

In a phone interview, Brooks, the paper mill's environmental manager, said the lake will remain at the same water levels indefinitely. If water gets too high in any one body of water, it can simply spill over into the lower body.

Brooks was not aware of any plans to restore the Orland Fire Department's access to the Narramissic pumping station.

The immediate value of keeping those dams in place would appear to trump the lost potential that would come from abandoning or destroying them, several individuals interviewed for this story said.

According to Bucksport Town Manager Derik Goodine, AIM officials have told him they're "exploring" the potential of using their new dams for a hydroelectric project.

Barlow, chairman of the Orland Dam Committee and a marine science professor recently retired from Maine Maritime Academy, said he knew very little about AIM's intentions, but speculated they wouldn't be in any rush to eliminate its numerous assets.

"Look at that piece of real estate, what makes it valuable. They've got deep water shipping, They've got railroads. They've got trucking. They also have power and they have water," Barlow said. "Until

they know what they're going to do with the site, they certainly wouldn't want to give it away, I don't think."

 Bio

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Charles Eichacker

Reporter at The Ellsworth American

Charles Eichacker covers the towns of Bucksport, Orland, Castine, Verona Island, Penobscot, Brooksville and Dedham. When not working on stories, he likes books, beer and the outdoors. ceichacker@ellsworthamerican.com

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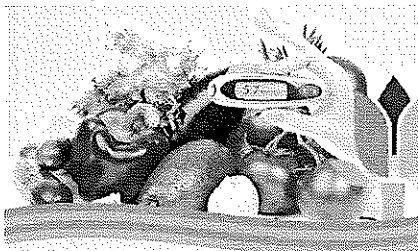


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