

# Pigeon River Country Association Newsletter

Spring/Summer 2021



**Pigeon River descends through former pond (all the area without trees was once the pond). Former boat house is near bottom left. A roadway for the project has been constructed to the right of the curving river. (River flows top to bottom in this view.)** *Photo by Dutch Neubecker*

## Final work underway to remove dam residue

*Joe Jarecki, association treasurer, reports on the project underway to create a clear, single Pigeon River channel where a retention pond once sat.*

The last stage of restoring the Pigeon River to a healthy free flowing condition in the area of the former Song of the Morning impoundment is on schedule to be implemented this summer.

The project will sequester and/or remove much of the sand left from impoundment so that it does not continue to move downstream and negatively impact the rest of the Pigeon River. The work will establish one channel rather than the several braided channels that now exist. It will also reestablish a floodplain in the area of the former impoundment where accumulated organic sediments create near-vertical banks that are anywhere from a few feet to seven, eight, nine, or more feet high.

A healthy river carries particulates in low quantities. An impoundment slows the current, causing sand and other materials to settle out. An increase in river flow can start the materials moving again in greater amounts that smother aquatic life and habitat downstream. The impoundment was first created by a logging dam in the 1880s and known subsequently as the Lansing Club Pond. Golden Lotus Inc, which operates Song of the Morning, rebuilt the dam in 1987.

Golden Lotus has been working with Stantec, the engineering firm, to restore the Pigeon River in the area that was impounded. I represent the association on the steering committee that worked on the restoration project after the drawdown, as well as the dam removal and bridge installation projects, which were completed in June 2016.

A design was developed and approved, funding has been obtained, required permits have been issued, bids have been solicited and offered, and Stantec recommended awarding the restoration contract to MJ VanDamme, a respected

contractor in the field of river restoration in the state of Michigan. Golden Lotus negotiated the contract details with MJ VanDamme. Construction has begun.

This restoration project will achieve the association's final goal regarding dam removal: to stop accumulated sand from moving downstream and negatively impacting the river below the former dam.

Once the project is complete, I believe the elements of the March 28, 2014 Collaborative Agreement for Restoration of the Pigeon River that the association entered into with Trout Unlimited and Golden Lotus will be achieved. At that point, I expect Golden Lotus to request termination of the April 3, 2014 46th Judicial Circuit County of Otsego Consent Judgment. When that happens, I will be recommending to the association board of directors that we approve the termination since all of the Consent Judgment objectives will have been achieved.

--Joe Jarecki

## Tubes replaced with timber bridge



**Three cylinders known locally as the tubes were replaced this spring with abutments for a new timber bridge over the Pigeon River (flowing right to left in this view) at the east end of Ford Road. Photo by Dutch Neubecker**



**Washed-out east end of Ford Lake Road got a makeover as tubes in the Pigeon (flowing bottom-to-top in this view) were being replaced by a timber bridge.**  
*Photo by Dutch Neubecker*



**The Otsego County Road Commission assembled the deck after contract work, supervised by Josh Leisen, Huron Pines senior project manager, removed the cylinders.** *Photo by Sandra Franz*

## Funding awaited for Black River property

Kerry Wieber, Department of Natural Resources forest land administrator, reports: Although we have been awarded funding through the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (\$2,335,000) for the Black River Ranch project, we are still waiting for a determination on the much larger federal grant request (\$10,665,000) which has been made through the federal Forest Legacy Program.

That funding is for the 2022 fiscal year, which does not begin until Oct. 1, 2021. So we won't know until some time after that date whether we have been successful in securing the federal funds. If we are, then we will begin the appraisal and negotiation process for the acquisition of the property. But likely the earliest that we would be able to acquire the property (once all funding is secured) is sometime in late 2022.



**Replacing this 1932 water well is one of many items on the agenda for the forest's new unit manager, Mark Monroe.**

## Forest manager hits the ground running

A water well housed in a pit 8 to 10 feet deep and apparently dating from 1932 needs replacing. That's one of the many tasks facing Mark Monroe since his appointment as PRC unit manager in April this year.

Among a host of activities, Mark is working to inventory, upgrade, and perform basic maintenance on the buildings around headquarters.

According to information he found in the file, the original water well is a 4-inch well, 80 feet deep, drilled by Hayes Well Drilling of Petoskey in 1932. The well pit, 8 to 10 feet below the surface next to the parking area outside forest headquarters, contains the well head and the well storage tank. It is marked on the surface by a low structure with a slanted roof. A spigot on the side wall is a popular spot for horse campers, particularly, to draw water for camping.

Such well pits are no longer permitted by OSHA regulations, and require air quality testing before anyone can descend into the pit to perform well maintenance. The pit is 5x5 with a re-rod ladder anchored in the concrete. Mark said "service is usually provided by folks here—that could be parks staff, fire staff, or even myself. Complicated service would be performed by a contractor."

The new well will be drilled in approximately the same location and will be 80' deep. Three in-ground storage tanks and newly-configured lines will provide water to the HQ, the Discovery Center, the maintenance garage, the staff house, and the small residence to the west of the HQ. The lines to the each of the buildings will be valved so they can be shut off individually and emptied; this will make winterization for the seasonal buildings easier. Importantly, the new well will provide access to high-pressure water for fighting fires.

The well pit will be filled in, the surface structure removed, but there will be a frost-free hydrant in the same location for campers to draw water.

Mark said, "Once we award the bid the contractor has until 9/15/2021 to complete. During hook up and replumbing of the new well I would anticipate an interruption of service of a day or two which I will coordinate with our department staff and the folks at the DC."

Mark's previous experience with and knowledge about maintaining wells when working on his family's properties allowed him to design a more modern well and its fittings that will provide

increased efficiency and fire-fighting capability and reduce liability.

He grew up on a farm in Alma, Michigan about two hours south of Pigeon River Country. He attended Michigan State University, obtaining a biochemistry degree in 1996 after abandoning his aim of becoming a doctor. He worked in the pharmaceutical world, manufacturing vaccines and spending a year in California, eventually deciding biochemistry “wasn’t the right fit for me.”

In 2001 he went back to MSU to get a fisheries and wildlife degree. That’s how he met Dr. Rique Campa, who is a long-term member of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council. As one of Mark’s professors, he shared specific examples of his own research work with aspen in the PRC. Mark worked for the DNR seasonally on a piping plover project and was hired as a full time DNR employee three months after graduation from MSU, working as a wildlife technician in Baldwin for two years.



**Mark Monroe**

“I learned a lot from old school biologists.” Transferred to Gaylord in 2005, there was “another great group of folks I got to learn under”—Brian Mastenbrook and Glen Mathews. Mark worked in the Pigeon, doing habitat

management for elk. The forest openings program “really fit me with my agriculture background.” He spent the next 16 years working for the wildlife division in Gaylord, expanding the acreage of the openings program, then accepted a land use position with the DNR’s Forest Resources Division west of the PRC out of Roscommon, where he learned a whole new aspect of land use management, such as easements and oil and gas activities, “which are pretty crucial out here in the Pigeon.” He interacted with Lambda Energy, which also has wells in the PRC.

When he arrived as the Pigeon’s unit manager in April 2021, a backlog of projects awaited him, things that had been set aside because the interim PRC managers had also retained their regular full time responsibilities as well.

“We have a number of buildings on state land that need demolition. A couple of them I’m going to be putting up for sale” to recycle them. Roads needed to be reopened under state guidelines in the recently acquired Walled Lake property and Storey Lake property.

He will be aided in general maintenance on the small residence and bunkhouse buildings near headquarters by PRC Association members and Discovery Center volunteers.

Mark lives in Gaylord with his wife, Erica, and son, Cole, 4, who he takes hiking in the forest often to observe wildlife. He hopes to pass on his love of the outdoors to his son.

He says he wants public input in addressing the goals in the Concept of Management and statewide management goals for deer and elk. “I want people to engage, to learn about why we clearcut for elk, and so on. Clearcutting is the only way aspen regenerates.” It provides habitat for elk, deer, grouse, wild turkey, and woodcock.

The habitat is managed to be sustainable with the population of the animals, maintaining a balance through land management and species harvest—“a healthy habitat” for the animals using it. “For elk and deer, the natural predators are not there, so we are the predators that manage the population.”

“In the forest, we have different cover types,” he said. “So if we have large hardwood cover stands, those are managed with an uneven-age strategy. You’d take some trees out” but not all. “What you’re looking for is some young trees, some middle age, and some old trees. Your management strategy is different because, from a maple’s perspective, it’s a shade-tolerant tree. It thrives when it has parent trees above it, while aspen is a shade-intolerant tree, so it has to have full sun.”

“We do have areas set aside where we’re not going to harvest them at all. It provides that natural forest community,” leaving some pine to grow longer to provide structural diversity, scenic values. The PRC is different from other forest areas that don’t have a plan in place. This has been vetted and we can now follow the plan. “I really like having that plan. I look at it almost daily.” If there’s a question, it can provide an answer. We can take it to the advisory council if appropriate. “My strategy is to use that plan, that’s what it’s there for.”

With the Storey Lake and Walled Lake properties newly-acquired, there is internal discussion about how they will fit, “Will they be part of the PRC or be adjacent to it? We’re working through that.”

“When you have properties that are coming in on the edges, we have other folks that want to see different things done on these properties.”

You have to have public input. “We want to know what the public would like to see there.”

## Discovery Center reopens displaying dugout canoe

The Pigeon River Country Discovery Center opening July 17, 2021 was its first regular public availability since fall 2019. Volunteers have been busy cleaning, restocking supplies, updating and refreshing exhibits, and training volunteer hosts.

The Discovery Center will be open and staffed by volunteers on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and on Sundays from noon to 4 p.m. until the end of October. Because the building is owned by the DNR and is part of the “main campus” of PRC buildings, the Discovery Center follows DNR guidelines for opening its building to the public. If the pandemic were to worsen once again, forcing closures, the Discovery Center would comply with any resulting DNR guidelines.

Visitors are asked to wear a mask inside the Discovery Center if they are not vaccinated. Masks are available at the front door, and disinfecting wipes, spray and hand sanitizer are available throughout the building.

The Discovery Center Steering Committee endeavors to change, rotate and update exhibits



**Canoe found in Black River is on display in the Discovery Center.**

*Photo by Sandra Franz*

so that visitors will return and find something new each time.

One exciting addition to the Discovery Center is a 14' long dugout canoe exhumed from the Black River on property that was part of, or near, the Black River Ranch, sometime in the 1950s. A 1994 appraisal by the Detroit Institute of Arts Curator of Native American Art states it is "safe to conclude that it is an Indian-made dug-out canoe," dating from before 1800 and perhaps a half-century before that.

A small group of committed and generous volunteers moved the fragile canoe from a pole barn on the Black River Ranch in March 2021—the 12-mile trip took one hour over spring roads—and donated funds for the carbon dating and display of the canoe. The Discovery Center has submitted a shard of canoe wood that was dislodged during transit to be carbon dated and should know its approximate age by August 2021.

If the canoe was made by Native Americans, its true home is with them. All Michigan tribes have been notified that the Discovery Center has the canoe, but we do not yet know if any of them want it.

The Steering Committee is working with the Odawa tribal historian Eric Hemenway, based in Harbor Springs, Michigan to develop an exhibit detailing Native Americans' philosophies about the natural world and land use and their activities in the Pigeon River Country. Opening of that exhibit is tentatively scheduled for fall 2021. In addition to Eric Hemenway's generous help, the committee is grateful for the expert assistance of the design firm Good Design Group (GDG), headquartered in Midland and Ypsilanti, MI. GDG designed the rest of the exhibits in the Discovery Center and will design the Native American exhibit to complement, but be distinct from, the existing exhibits.

—Sandra Franz

## **DNR awaits legal guidance on oil wells**

Leadership of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources is indicating that there will be

no change of rules in dealing with oil and gas wells in Pigeon River Country. Instead, there may be a sharpening of the tools in the existing documents to clarify what can be done to advance the situation that has existed for more than half a century.

Matt Fry, Land Use Program Leader, Forest Resources Division, DNR, said in a Zoom connection from Lansing that senior officials in Lansing have concluded after discussing related documents that to modify those requirements would not be just a DNR decision, but would require legal as well as legislative action. The DNR does not anticipate supporting any modification to those established requirements, Fry said.

He said the DNR is seeking a legal review and recommendations from the attorney general regarding marginal wells and other requirements associated with operations in the Pigeon, along with guidance from the AG on how the DNR should interpret those requirements. A response from the AG is expected soon, Fry said.

He spoke via Zoom to the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council's Resource Use and Extraction Committee that met July 14 in Gaylord. The committee was following up on the advisory council recommendation to the DNR on Jan. 21 that "appropriate agencies work with the current oil and gas production operator, Lambda Energy, to develop a definitive and expeditious schedule for concluding hydrocarbon production within the Consent Agreement boundaries."

The Pigeon River Country Association's previous newsletter of winter 2020-2021 reviewed the situation in an article, "Wells getting a closer look," that pointed out the widely-held expectation dating from the 1970s that the wells would be gone by 2000.

Matt Fry said meetings had been held with the DNR director, the section manager for the Minerals Management Division, and others to look at the council's resolution and at the PRC plugging guidelines, and the proposal to modify those.

### **Membership renewal reminder**

Membership dues help provide a scholarship to a student intern who assists the forest manager in the summer, and help us protect the wild character of the PRC. Your membership expiration date is on your mailing label or email sending this newsletter. Please keep your membership current. Thank you!



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<https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org>

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