

Pigeon River Country Association

Newsletter

Summer/Fall 2024



@Huron Pines

Cornwall Flooding Dam restoration project underway

Cornwall Creek Flooding is being drawn down approximately six feet to comply with state safety regulations and to prepare Cornwall Dam for the installation of a new water intake structure. If the project is successful, Cornwall Flooding will eventually return to pre-drawdown water levels.

The drawdown began on August 12 when several eight-inch holes were drilled into the dam's concrete sidewall structure, marking the first step of a two-phase project led by the non-profit conservation organization Huron Pines.

According to a Michigan DNR Press Release, the dam will be lowered no more

than six inches per day until water levels have been reduced by six feet, probably around mid-October.

Once phase one is complete, Huron Pines said they will work with Wade Trim Engineering to plan the construction of a new dam structure. Huron Pines Associate Director Lisha Ramsdell said construction would likely begin during the spring or summer of 2025.

But moving forward with restoration is not a given. It will all depend on whether or not Huron Pines is able to get an EGLE-approved permit for the new structure once the drawdown is complete, and whether or not they have enough funding left over if and when that time comes.

“I’m hoping we will be able to determine that this year,” Ramsdell said. “Once we have an approved permit for the rebuild phase, we will [work to] bid that out very quickly. Right now [Wade Trim Engineering] is working on designing that new structure with EGLE and the DNR.”

The estimated cost of the dam's renovation was secured earlier this year at approximately \$1.5 million, but that doesn't take into account the additional cost of future construction bids, which will ultimately dictate whether the dam is repaired or removed.

Ramsdell explained that some of the \$1.5 million has already been spent on the project, and that more will have to be spent throughout the duration of the drawdown.

“We are hoping the balance we have left for construction will be enough to carry us forward,” she said.

If construction bids come back significantly higher than what is available, the DNR would have to decide between moving forward with the restoration project and doing a complete and permanent drawdown of the flooding.



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“We are getting to a cost-benefit threshold,” Ramsdell said.

Interested contractors will attend a pre-bid site visit this fall. Ramsdell expressed hopes that this will help “speed things up a little bit,” since they will be able to see the site in its drawn-down state.

“That should give them a better idea of what they are getting into as far as what a rebuild would look like,” she explained.

While public access to Cornwall Flooding will still be permitted during the drawdown, the DNR press release warned recreators that “access to the water will become increasingly difficult or impossible as it recedes. Exposed soils will be very soft and may be dangerous to people attempting to reach the water.”

One of Michigan's popular equestrian routes, the Shore-to-Shore trail, currently runs along the Cornwall Dam's berm and will have to be rerouted, likely via Osmun or Tin Bridge Road.

“It is not ideal to put horses [on those roads],” Ramsdell said, “but that’s the only viable option, so we are working with the road commission to get some signs up to alert [motorists] that they will likely see equestrian use, especially in the fall when we see more equestrian riders out in the forest.”

Cornwall Flooding is home to several species of stocked fish that do not live in the Pigeon River, including various panfish and largemouth bass.

While fish populations will likely see a slight drop after the drawdown due to

winter kill-off, Ramsdell said the DNR does not have plans to increase the legal limit of take during any stage of the project, and that they do not intend to restock any of the impoundment's fish populations upon project completion.

“[With] the plan being to draw those flooding levels back up, [the DNR fisheries biologists] feel confident that it will repopulate itself pretty quickly,” Ramsdell said.

Cornwall Dam has been considered a safety concern for years. It is inspected by the EGLE every three years, and was assigned a high hazard safety rating in 2019. A high hazard safety dam is defined by the Federal Emergency Management Agency as “any dam whose failure or misoperation will cause loss of human life and significant property destruction.”

Cornwall Flooding is one of Pigeon River Country's most frequented destinations. Located on Cornwall Creek, it feeds into the Pigeon River after leaving the dam. Since the late 1960s, this secluded 161-acre impoundment has offered visitors several outdoor recreation opportunities ranging



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from fishing and kayaking to horseback riding and birdwatching.

According to Huron Pines, the flooding's ecological impacts are less significant than if Cornwall Creek were a cold-water stream, since the dam does not impede cold-water fish passage.

The flooding also contributes substantial economic and social value to the surrounding community.

To donate to the Cornwall Flooding Dam project, visit huronpines.org/savecornwall

Black River Ranch one step closer to becoming part of the PRC

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources secured enough funding to purchase the Black River Ranch for \$17 million in December of 2025.

Once it is acquired, the nearly 8,850-acre property will be administered under the Pigeon River Country State Forest Concept of Management.

“Black River Ranch is one of the last remaining privately-owned, large, intact, forested tracts of land in the Lower Peninsula,” DNR Forest Land Administrator Kerry Heckman said. “An opportunity to acquire such a significant parcel is rare.

“Considering the property includes such incredible resources in the form of river corridors, lakes, forests, wildlife and fisheries habitat, and offers countless public recreational opportunities, it is an

incredibly important resource to protect and provide to the residents of Michigan.”

Black River Ranch was appraised at \$18 million, but Heckman said the landowner is donating \$1 million in the form of a bargain sale, reducing its cost to the State to \$17 million.

Little Traverse Conservancy, in partnership with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and The Nature Conservancy, is also donating \$1 million toward the acquisition. The remaining funding was secured through a combination of grants including \$5,335,000 provided by the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and \$10,665,000 provided by the Forest Legacy Program.

The transaction was formally approved by DNR Director Scott Bowen on August 8 at a Natural Resources Commission meeting.

Located “in the heart of Michigan’s elk range,” this prime elk habitat property provides habitat for a variety of species including ruffed grouse, woodcock, bobcat, black bear, deer, and coyote. Many consider the Black River to be the premier brook trout stream in the Lower Peninsula. It also provides recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking,



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wildlife viewing, skiing, snowshoeing, canoeing, and kayaking, according to Heckman.

The acquisition of Black River Ranch would provide outdoor recreationists with access to more than 14 miles of Black River, East Branch of Black River, and Stewart Creek corridor. It would also open to the public three inland lakes, including the 150-acre Silver Lake, which offers ample bass and panfish angling opportunities.

A purchase agreement between the State and the property landowner was reached in May, after a years-long discussion initiated by the Little Traverse Conservancy in late 2019; nearly 100 years after the Black River Ranch was established as a private hunting and fishing club in 1920.

Heckman explained that this purchase agreement constitutes a binding contract between the landowner and the DNR, “Meaning the landowner cannot sell the property to another party or consider other offers or options for the property.”

Huron Pines Associate Director and PRCAC Board Member Lisha Ramsdell said a “big hurdle” for acquiring Black River Ranch stemmed from an agreement between the property’s landowner and its lessees.

“The owner and the lessees went to a legal challenge over [the proposed acquisition because] the lessees have rights to the property until the end of 2025,” she explained. “After that, their lease rights will be terminated. The state will then be prepared to purchase that property in December of 2025. Until then, it is still private property.”

The rapidly changing real estate market also caused challenges for the State in securing the necessary funding. Heckman said the property was initially appraised in late 2019, and that the DNR used that appraisal to help inform their requests for grant funding.

“[But by the time] the grant funding was awarded and became available for us to do the formal, federally-approved appraisal in 2022, real estate values had changed significantly,” Heckman said. “We ended up with a shortfall of \$3 million. As a result, we had to apply for a second grant from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, which was awarded this past December.”

This persistence is largely motivated by the department’s understanding of potential consequences should the State not acquire Black River Ranch.

Heckman explained that since there are no legal protections existing on the Black River Ranch, “If the DNR does not acquire it, the potential for the property to be fragmented [or, split into smaller parcels and sold] is very real.”

She said the DNR’s acquisition of the property will eliminate the threat of fragmentation and will ensure the property’s natural resources remain intact and protected.

“The Pigeon River Country is the closest you can get to a “wilderness-like” experience in the Lower Peninsula,” Heckman said. “So the opportunity to add such an incredible piece of property to this already very special part of Michigan is not something that we could pass up.”

Heckman said that all structures existing on the property, including a ranch house; a main lodge; five cabins; a workshop, and 3 pole barns, will be removed, consistent with Concept of Management guidelines.

Additional Acquisitions

“In June we closed on the acquisition of the Sturgeon River Corridor property,” Heckman said. “[It] is 440 acres with over 4,400 feet of Sturgeon River corridor in the southwest portion of the PRC.”

The DNR also secured funding for the acquisition of the Doe Lake property, comprising two parcels totaling 556 acres in southern Cheboygan County off Grass Lake Road.

“Both Little Traverse Conservancy and Huron Pines have been outstanding partners on this project,” Heckman said. “We’re hoping to have the parcels in State ownership within the next several months.”

Core Energy seeks to extract oil and gas located within Consent Order Area

Core Energy submitted a petition to EGLE to drill two CO2 injection wells and two oil-producing wells with surface locations on private property outside of the Pigeon River Country State Forest and bottom hole locations within the Forest’s 1980 Consent Order area.

Oil and gas exploration and development within the 1980 Consent Order area has been strictly prohibited since the late 1980s.

“Core Energy proposed to EGLE for a well which would have a surface location outside the PRC, but the bottom hole would be extracting oil from inside Pigeon River Country,” the forest’s DNR Unit Manager Mark Monroe said. “They can take their wellbore and angle it underground [to reach the pool].”

That particular oil rig’s surface location would be installed on private land located in Section 7 of Charlton Township (North).



@Dale Franz

“Nobody really knows if it is allowed,” Monroe said.

EGLE has scheduled a hearing for September 25 at 9:00 a.m. at 611 W. Ottawa Street in Lansing, Michigan to take testimony about the petition of Core Energy for an order of the Supervisor of Wells approving a plan of unitization for enhanced oil recovery.

According to Sandy Franz, PRCAC Member and Resource Use & Extraction Committee Chair, the timeline for Core Energy’s proposed oil and gas extraction projects would span at least several years.

“In addition to the time required for legal and administrative review, upon approval, the CO2 wells would be drilled first,” Franz said. “The reef would then be flooded with CO2 to increase pressure for up to four years until oil and gas production begins.”



@Dale Franz

Franz explained that, while Lambda Energy Resources plugged a few low-producing wells within Pigeon River Country last year, other gas and oil companies have grown increasingly interested in drilling within the forest’s annexed area and on private land abutting the forest.

“The scrutiny that the DNR and EGLE give to gas and oil development within the forest is a safeguard,” she said. “Within the consent area some of those wells are beginning to slow down to the point that Lambda is thinking about

closing them. But in other areas of the forest, applications for some actual new drills have been made.

“The horizon for the end of oil and gas activity in the forest is still pretty far out there.”

Discovery Center promotes ethics and education through new hands-on programs

The Discovery Center debuted two new educational program series this summer: “Family Fun Make & Take” and “Ready to Go.”

Both program series were created by Conservation Program Developer Katherine Benedict, a Huron Pines Americorps member serving with the DNR at Pigeon River Country State Forest through this November.

Benedict and 2024 PRCA Intern Lauren Schagel said they reached over 102 kids through Discovery Center youth programming this summer, specifically through Make and Take & Ready to Go programs.

Development of these programs was made possible thanks to a \$2,000 grant from the Great Lakes Energy People Fund, according to Benedict.

While there were already some family programs within the Discovery Center’s Community Events program series, Benedict explained that the Ready to Go and Make & Take programs were developed to provide more educational opportunities for young people. They were formulated to be more “hands-on,” and to

have children create something they could take home with them as a lasting reminder of the experience.

While there were already some family programs within the Discovery Center’s Community Events program series, Benedict explained that the Ready to Go and Make & Take programs were developed because the Discovery Center wanted to provide more educational opportunities for young people.

“The Discovery Center has always had a strong annual Community Event Series mostly targeted towards adults,” she said. “But this year we wanted to expand and offer a series of programs designed for kids, with the hope of inspiring them to love and care for this forest for generations.”

Family Fun Make & Take

“Make & Take programs are a series of events that we held this summer for families to come out to the PRC,” Benedict explained. “The idea is that the kids get to do a nature-based craft and learn about a nature topic.”

The Discovery Center hosted three Make & Take programs this summer: Feathered Friends, All About Plants, and Mammal Mania.

“We did a birding walk [for Feathered Friends],” Benedict said. “The kids learned how to use binoculars and painted a birdhouse to take home.”

For the All About Plants program, Benedict and Schagel took kids on a scavenger hunt, talked to them about the plants they found,

and helped them build decorated plant presses to take home. Benedict said the kids also learned what an invasive species is, which invasives are found in the PRC, and how they are controlled.

For Mammal Mania, kids played a foraging game, assembled an animal track chart, and used clay to make track impressions.

“They were really interesting and really well put together,” Schagel said. “I wish I would have had experiences like that as a kid.”

Ready to Go

Ready to Go programs offer a menu of six nature-based programs to school groups, scout groups and other groups with kids, Benedict explained.

“The intention behind developing this program series was to have something that we could put on on a short notice and that can be used over and over again,” she said.

“I originally put together five programs but we recently added a sixth,” she continued. “We had a special request to put on a program about bears, and it went so well that I decided to keep it on as a [permanent] program.”

In that program, the kids played the same foraging game featured in Mammal Mania.

“Lauren was a crucial part in developing the bear foraging game and has been just wonderful helping put all these programs on this summer,” Benedict said.

Schagel said the game involves collecting different colored balls at various stations, each correlated to unique bear facts.

“We talked about bear diets, including honeycomb, berries, fish, and even human garbage,” Schagel said. “[The kids] learned about the importance of keeping lids on garbage bins while camping, and how to lessen human impacts. We talked about how what a bear eats impacts the formation of its teeth, and even went over the different color morphs of black bear and why they form.”

Other programs in the Ready to Go series include Wildland Fires; Birds; Mammals; Plants; and Elk.

“Our hope is that people will be inspired by these programs to create adventures in the forest for themselves and develop a deeper love of the PRC,” Benedict said.

Parting Thoughts from Katherine and Lauren

“This year, my Huron Pines Americorps service term at the DNR has been just wonderful,” Benedict said. “It’s hard to choose a favorite part, but if I had to, [it would be] developing and hosting the youth programs. It’s been wonderful to see kids develop a love for the forest I’ve come to love so much.

“As I’m wrapping up my service term I’m excited to see how these programs will be used in future years. I’m starting to prepare the programs to be presented by other people, potentially future Americorps members.”

Schagel had a similarly positive experience working as a Huron Pines Americorps

intern, and she said that learning how to talk with kids about natural resource management and conservation was one of the highlights of her internship.

“Kids have a completely different mindset,” she said. “They have different perspectives and it’s really neat to learn how they react to certain things. Some of the questions they come up with are really interesting, whether that has to do with bear or elk or forestry or just getting out there and interacting with natural resources more.”

Schagel said she also enjoyed designing projects and hosting events, particularly those geared toward younger audiences. “Being a part of the PRC this summer has been a unique and rewarding opportunity,” she said. “It was a pleasure to work with all who staff HQ, Discovery Center volunteers, DNR officials from surrounding counties, and all the beloved guests the Pigeon welcomes.”



@Katherine Benedict

“Thank you for your dedication, knowledge, and stories throughout the summer,” she continued. “Every day, rain or shine, I was able to find interest in my work and was able to explore outside of the hours of my internship. To that, I send a thank you to the Forest too, for which we all come together.”

The PRCA funds an intern every year to assist the Unit Manager. The position includes a \$4,950 stipend sent directly to the student’s college tuition account.

The amount the DNR charges to stay in the Staff House/Bunk House, near the Forest Headquarters, is also added to the scholarship.

To learn more about future Discovery Center events, interested parties may contact Katherine Benedict at (989) 966-6107 and benedictk@michigan.gov, or through the Discovery Center website, <https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org>.



@Katherine Benedict

Updated High Country Pathway and Pigeon River Country State Forest maps are now available for \$10. These waterproof, rip-resistant maps were published by the PRCA and are available at pigeonrivercountrydiscoverycenter.org, at the Discovery Center, and at Forest Headquarters.

Please Join or Renew Your Membership

Please join us in helping to protect the Pigeon River Country and its resources and wildlife. Individual memberships are \$20 per year. Family memberships are \$25 per year. Visit our web-site to join or renew, or mail a check payable to 'PRCA' to: The Pigeon River Country Association, P.O. Box 122, Gaylord MI, 49734-0122

Thank you!



Visit our websites at <http://www.pigeonriver.org>
<https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org>

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