



# Ministry of Natural Resources, Engage Lake Bernard: Summary Report

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who participated in the various conversations and engagement activities, for taking the time to express your views and insights, and for being open to sharing experiences. Your thoughts and views have been shared with MNR to inform next steps in water level management on Lake Bernard.

Thank you also to the Village of Sundridge, Township of Strong, and the Lake Bernard Property Owner's Association (LBPOA) for the support throughout the engagement project to help share information and encourage participation.

And thank-you to the Near North Enviro-Education Centre (NNEEC) for sharing your space for our in-person event.

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Lake Bernard is within the Williams Treaty and Robinson-Huron Treaty lands. We are grateful to have the opportunity to visit these lands and appreciate the generations of people who have cared for the land for time immemorial.



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## 1.0 Background

The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) owns and operates the dam at the outlet of Lake Bernard. Lake Bernard is in the Village of Sundridge and the Township of Strong and is part of the southern Lake Huron drainage basin and the Magnetawan River watershed. Over time, MNR has heard some concerns regarding water levels on Lake Bernard.

MNR manages dam operations in accordance with the Magnetawan River Water Control Operating Plan, which strives to balance the interests of the users along the Magnetawan River system considering social, ecological and economic factors. Despite this, there remains concerns, and at times competing interests, regarding water level management among Lake Bernard property owners and Lake users. To better understand the current situation, MNR initiated an engagement process to hear from members of the community, including people who are interested in and/or impacted by water levels on the lake.

To support this engagement initiative, MNR retained J Consulting Group to facilitate several engagement activities aimed at learning more about the diverse interests, concerns, and observations about water levels among Lake residents and users. This report provides a summary of the approach to engaging the community and what was heard throughout the various conversations and engagement activities.

## 2.0 Approach to Engagement

At the onset of the project, a detailed Engagement Plan was created and shared with MNR to confirm engagement objectives and activities to be undertaken through the engagement process.

The purpose of the engagement was, firstly, through the engagement process, to create an opportunity for information sharing between MNR and the community of interest, and, secondly, to listen and collect information from the community on various experiences and perspectives regarding water levels on Lake Bernard.

**Promise to the Community:** Your time and ideas are valued. Information, ideas, and concerns will be documented accurately and shared with the MNR.

**Engagement Goal:** The project team will work directly with all interested and potentially affected members of the community to make sure your concerns and ideas are understood and considered.

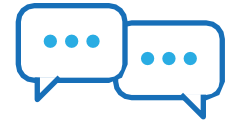
The goal of the engagement process was to hear from Lake Bernard residents and users to create a better understanding of the diversity of views and experiences regarding to water levels. To address various preferences and ensure broad participation, the engagement approach included multiple methods such as online surveys, a dedicated project website, in-person and virtual coffee conversations, and direct outreach through emails and phone call.

## 2.1 Engagement Activities

The following engagement activities were undertaken to facilitate the collection of views and experiences.

### Pre-Engagement Conversations

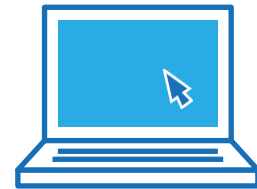
Pre-engagement conversations were identified as a strategy to provide the consulting team with early insights into community concerns and preferences, allowing for an opportunity to further shape engagement activities.



Pre-engagement conversations were facilitated with the Mayors of both Sundridge and Strong, and with three members of the LBPOA including the Chair. These two initial meetings were held via Zoom in December 2023, as a way of introducing the Engage Lake Bernard project and gathering an initial sense of community interests and needs. Results from these initial conversations were used to help shape the engagement activities and approach to community outreach. These pre-engagement consultations also identified areas of collaboration, such as supporting outreach and promotion efforts.

### Online Engagement

Creating an online presence (i.e., website) for the Lake Bernard Engagement Project was seen as an important tool to making information and engagement opportunities accessible to a broad audience, including those who may not be able to attend in-person events. The website was a key tool to support the two-way sharing of information between MNR and the Lake Bernard Community (property owners, lake users, local businesses). In addition, it allowed for continuous engagement throughout the duration of the project.

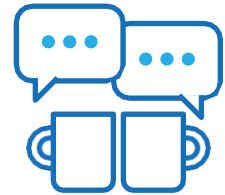


The Engage Lake Bernard website was created at the onset of the project and launched on February 16, 2024. The site included five pages:

- **Homepage** – providing an introduction to the project.
- **Get Involved** – providing an opportunity for visitors to learn about the various engagement activities and how to participate. Links were provided here for the survey and for the coffee conversation registration.
- **Info Exchange** – providing a space for people to post their stories and photos, and their questions.
- **Resource Room** – providing a space to learn more about water level management on Lake Bernard. Resources included the Magnetawan River Water Control Operating Plan including excerpt of the Lake Bernard Dam Operation Manual, the Best Management Practice Target Line, links to the Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act (LRIA), and the Water Management on Lake Bernard Background Report completed in March of 2024.
- **Contact** – providing an opportunity for visitors to submit a form and/or reach out directly to the consulting team via email or phone.

### Coffee Conversations

Engagement activities also provided opportunities for deeper engagement through small group discussions (coffee conversations). In addition to sharing experiences with the consulting team, participants were able to share their experiences with one another, creating a broader understanding of various perspectives. Offering both virtual and in-person options ensured that people with different preferences and schedules could participate.



As such, two coffee conversations were facilitated as an opportunity for interested and affected parties to meet as a group to share views and experiences about water levels on Lake Bernard.

A virtual session was held via Zoom on May 1<sup>st</sup> from 7pm-8:30pm, and a second session was held in-person on May 4<sup>th</sup> from 10am-12pm at the Near North Enviro-Education Centre (NNEEC) in the Village of Sundridge. Each coffee conversation session included a brief presentation outlining the context and purpose of the engagement project and facilitated small group discussions. The presentation is provided in **Appendix A**.

## Survey

An online survey was created as a tool for reaching a broad range of Lake users and engaging with individuals who may not have been engaged in past engagement initiatives, or who may not be comfortable providing their feedback in a more public way (such as through the website or in a coffee conversation). A survey also provides a more convenient way for people to share their views, as it can be completed at a time and location that best suits the individual.



The survey was created using the Survey Monkey platform and was launched on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024. The survey closed on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024<sup>1</sup>. Survey questions were aimed at hearing about people's current level of satisfaction with water levels on Lake Bernard, what concerns they may have, what their experiences have been on the Lake, and what their priorities are for the future of water level management on the Lake. To better understand people's concerns and views, the survey also asked additional questions to help identify the location and season of participant experiences.

## Written Submissions

In addition to the feedback collected through the engagement activities outlined above, two written submissions were received. One submission was received from a member of the Round Table on Lake Health for Lake Bernard, and the second was a preliminary joint submission from the Village of Sundridge, Township of Joly, and Township of Strong (Tri-Council).



The combination of synchronous (e.g., coffee conversations) and asynchronous (e.g., website, surveys) methods provided several benefits:

- **Flexibility:** Multiple engagement methods accommodated different schedules and preferences, allowing more people to participate in a way, and at a time, best suited to them.
- **Accessibility:** Online methods (i.e., survey, virtual coffee conversation) allowed for participation among seasonal Lake Bernard community members who may be unable to attend in-person events.
- **Broadening Community Awareness:** Conversational engagement methods (i.e., coffee conversations and website) provided an opportunity for interested and affected parties to hear the concerns and experiences of other Lake Bernard community members, contributing to a broader understanding of community views and concerns.

<sup>1</sup> The timeline of the survey was extended from a 3-week period to a 6-week period to provide a larger window of opportunity to hear from interested Lake Bernard community members.



## 2.2 Community Outreach






In addition to establishing the Engage Lake Bernard webpage. Several community outreach activities were undertaken to promote engagement in the project.

Outreach activities were targeted largely at residents of Lake Bernard (permanent and seasonal), as well as members of the LBPOA and the Roundtable for Health of Bernard Lake, the Almaguin Highlands Chamber of Commerce, the Near North Enviro-Education Centre, other community organizations, and many local businesses.

The Mayors of the Village of Sundridge and the Township of Strong, and the Chair of the LBPOA were helpful in sharing information with residents and members to support all outreach and engagement activities.

To support outreach efforts, a project poster was created. The poster included an introduction of the project, opportunities to get involved, links project webpage, and contact information to reach the consulting team directly. A sample of the poster is provided in **Appendix B**.

## 2.2.1 Outreach Activities

- **Community Postings:** Hard copies of the project poster were displayed in various locations in the Village including the bulletin board outside the Post Office, Municipal Offices, the NNEEC, and at several local businesses. 
- **Mail-out:** The project poster was also distributed via direct mail, through the Village of Sundridge and Township of Strong, to residents. The mail-outs were distributed on or around April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024, to approximately 1,061 households (689 property owners in the Village of Sundridge and 372 property owners in the Township of Strong). 
- **Direct Outreach:** Direct emails and phone calls were made to local business and organizations informing various groups of the Engage Lake Bernard project and opportunities to be involved. Most were also provided with the project poster to share with their customers/staff/members as appropriate. A list of community businesses and organizations included in the direct outreach is provided as part of **Appendix C**. 
- **Social Media Posts:** Facebook posts were shared through MNR's account to help raise awareness of the engagement activities. Posts were geo-targeted to the areas around Lake Bernard. A total of three posts were made, the first in February to introduce the project and the project webpage, second in March to share information on the coffee conversations, and the third in April as a final reminder to complete the survey. The survey and coffee conversation events were also shared through the Sundridge and Strong social media channels. 
- **LPBOA Outreach:** Through the Chair of the LBPOA, several direct emails were sent to Lake Bernard property owners who are part of the group's e-mail distribution list. Approximately three emails about the Engage Lake Bernard project were sent to the LBPOA distribution list, which includes about 220 email addresses. The first email, sent in December 2023, was to notify property owners about the project and provide the project webpage and contact information, the second, sent February 2024, was to promote the launch of the online survey, and the third, sent in April, was to encourage registration at the coffee conversations and a reminder to complete the survey. 

Overall, these methods and tactics were aimed at ensuring a robust, inclusive, and effective engagement process, aligning with the project's goals of meaningful two-way communication and to capture diversity of experiences.

## 2.3 First Nations Engagement

In addition to the engagement and outreach activities outlined above, the consulting team reached out directly to five First Nation communities and Métis Nation of Ontario. Outreach was conducted via email and by telephone. Outreach was initiated in December 2023, with follow ups in February, March and May 2024. Outreach via e-mail and follow up telephone contact was conducted with:

- Magnetawan First Nation
- Henvey Inlet First Nation
- Dokis First Nation
- Shawanaga First Nation
- Wasauksing First Nation
- MNO Region 5

## 2.4 Summary of Community Reach

Outreach efforts were successful in reaching over 1,000 residents, businesses and community organizations. A summary of reach activity is highlighted in the graphic below. Overall, there were nearly 300 unique visitors to the Engage Lake Bernard webpage, over 1,000 local residents received a project notice in the mail outlining opportunities to participate in engagement, email notices and updates were sent to over 200 Lake Bernard Property Owners Association (LBPOA) members, and over 20 community organizations received direct calls, emails, or in-person visits. Project posters were distributed in 10 key community locations as noted in Section 2.2.1.



**297**

unique visitors to  
engagelakebernard.ca



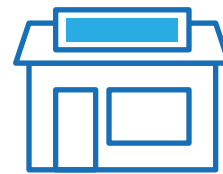
**1,016**

residents received  
notices in the mail



**220**

LBPOA members  
notified via email



**20**

local organizations and  
businesses received direct  
emails/calls/visits



**10**

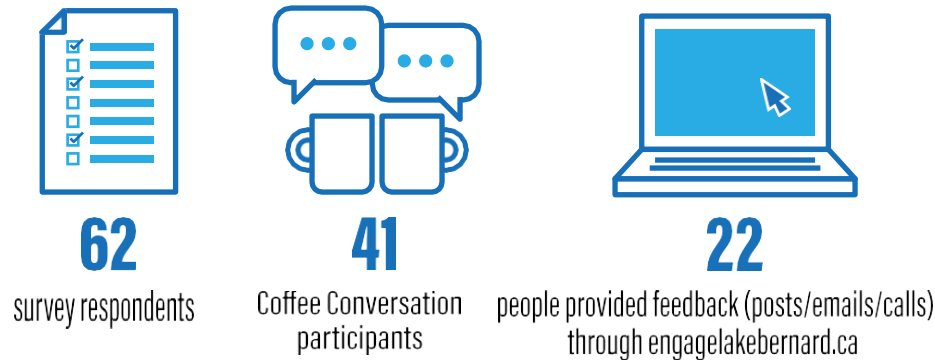
posters displayed  
in key community  
locations

## 3.0 Participant Insights

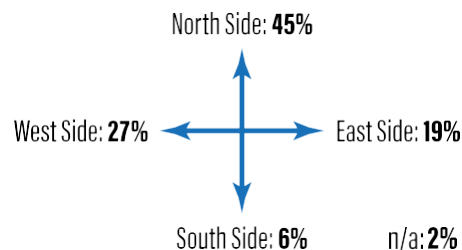
### 3.1 Who We Heard From

Over the course of our engagement activities described above (i.e., website, coffee conversations, surveys, and written submissions), we heard from approximately 80-90 unique people from the Lake Bernard community<sup>2</sup>. Engagement participants included home/cottage owners on or near the Lake, recreational lake users, and local businesses and community groups.

A summary of participants by key engagement activities are shown in the graphic below.



Participation in engagement activities came from around the Lake. Based on survey results, most participation was from residents/lake users in the north (including Village of Sundridge) at 45%, followed by residents on the west side at 27%, 19% from the east side, and 6% from the south side.



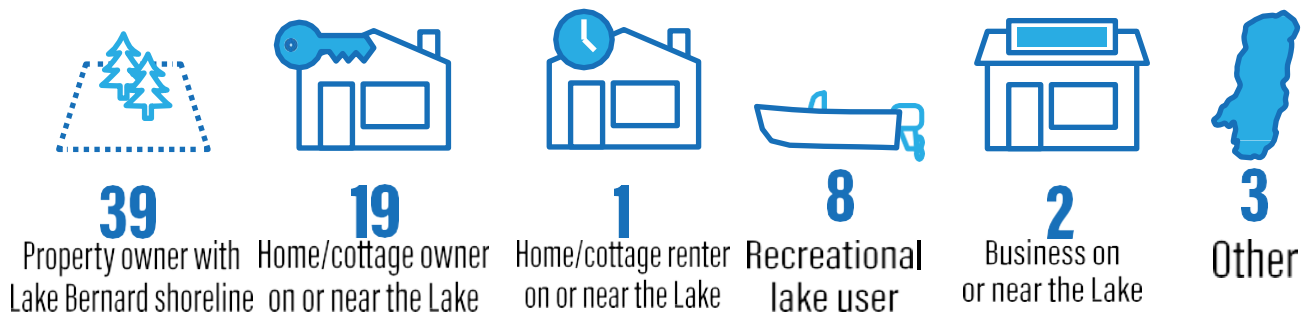
<sup>2</sup> Given that many people participated in multiple activities, it is difficult to precisely identify the number



of unique participants.



Most (95%) survey respondents we heard from are either property owners with Lake Bernard shoreline (39) or home/cottage owners or renters on or near the Lake (20).



Similarly, feedback heard through the Engage Lake Bernard website and through the two coffee conversations were largely property owners on the Lake.

Most people participating in activities have a long connection with the Lake (i.e., more than 20 years), with some participation from new community members. 87% survey respondents indicated that they have had a connection with Lake Bernard for more than 20 years.

Of the local 5 First Nations and Métis Nation we reached out to, conversations were held with one First Nations community.

The following section provides an overview of key themes and messages that emerged throughout the engagement activities. While we have provided quantitative analysis where possible and appropriate (largely based on survey results), some aspects of our findings are inherently qualitative. These qualitative insights reflect overarching themes and views raised by participants throughout various engagement activities, including those that were more conversational in nature and not easily quantified. This approach ensures that the report captures both the numerical data and the broader context of community feedback.

## 3.2 What We Heard

The community engagement activities, including surveys, in-person and virtual coffee conversations, and online engagement, reveal participant's deep connections to the lake itself. Participants, many of whom have had ties to the lake for decades, value Lake Bernard for its unique geological formation, the aquatic ecosystem, accessibility from public and private properties, recreational opportunities, natural beauty, and the sense of community and family history.

The engagement process highlighted a range of perspectives and concerns, reflecting the diverse ways in which people interact with and value the lake. Perspectives did vary, with some differences noted based on where people live on, or use, the lake.

No matter which part of the lake people were from, participants were interested in how the information generated through this process would translate to actions, and some were under the impression that no action would be taken unless there was a community consensus or vote.

Throughout the various engagement activities, participants were asked to share their experiences and feedback on several discussion topics:

1. Values of Lake Bernard
2. Current level of satisfaction with water levels
3. Concerns with water levels
4. Priorities for water level management
5. Communication and information preferences

A summary of key themes and messages heard throughout all the various engagement activities is provided below and grouped by discussion topic.

More detailed feedback on engagement activity results is provided in:

- **Appendix D: Survey Results by Question**
  - Provides a breakdown of results for each survey question
- **Appendix E: Summary of Coffee Conversations by Question**
  - Provides the six conversation questions used to facilitate discussions and storytelling
- **Appendix F: Summary of Online Engagement by Theme**
  - Provides a summary of the comments received utilizing the various contact methods through the Engage Lake Bernard website

## Resident and Lake User Values

Based on feedback from engagement participants, the most valued aspects of interacting with Lake Bernard are spending quality time with family, enjoying the clean and clear water, and engaging in various water activities such as boating and swimming. Respondents also appreciate the peaceful and relaxing natural environment, the scenic beauty of the Lake, local wildlife, and the sense of community it fosters. Access to the Lake and its recreational opportunities is cherished, with a particular emphasis on maintaining its pristine condition for future generations.



As part of the survey, participants were asked to share what they value most. A breakdown of the survey results is shared below.

### Survey Results: What do you value the most about your time in, on, and around the Lake? (number of participants or n = 61)

- Family time (22)<sup>3</sup>
- Community (10)
- Clean water/healthy lake (22)
- Boating/water activities (18)
- Swimming (17)
- Natural environment (15)
- Relaxation/peace and quiet (12)
- Recreation (10)
- Scenic/beauty (12)
- Public access/access to the lake (3)

This feedback was echoed in the coffee conversations and within comments posted on the Engage Lake Bernard website.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers in brackets represent number of respondents.

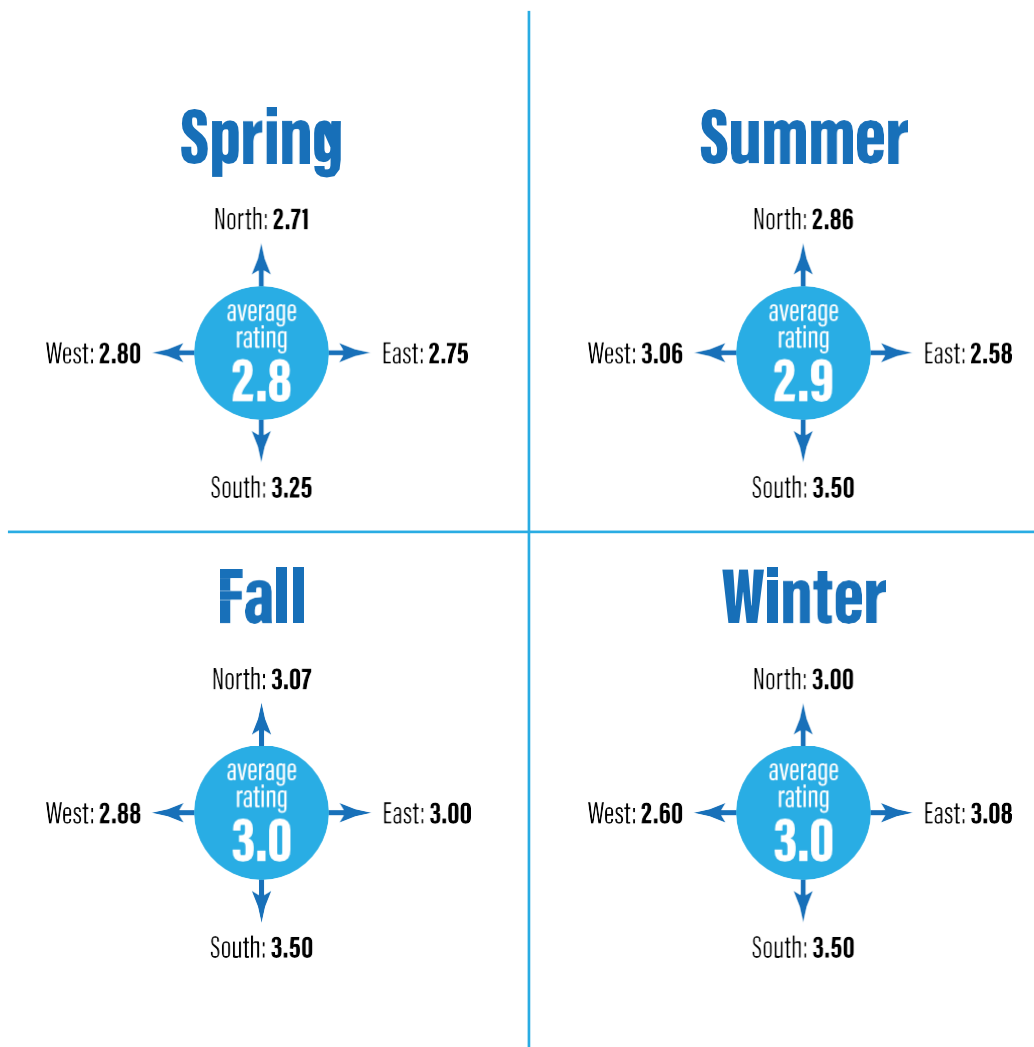


## Water Level Satisfaction

Feedback on water level satisfaction was fairly consistent across all engagement activities and highlighted slight variations in satisfaction by season and by location around the Lake.

Generally, there are slightly higher levels of satisfaction in the fall and winter. Spring has lower levels of satisfaction largely due to shoreline erosion and property damage, while summer has lower levels of satisfaction due to impacts on recreational activities such as boating.

Survey participants were asked to rate their current level of satisfaction with Lake Bernard water levels, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being very unsatisfied and 5 being very satisfied. The illustration below shows water level satisfaction by season, and by where on the lake respondents were from (north, east, south, west).



As shown, there is only slight variation in level of satisfaction by season ranging from 3 (out of 5) in the fall and winter, to 2.9 in the summer, and the lowest level of satisfaction in the spring at 2.8.

By area around the Lake (north, east, south, west), results highlight some differences, with higher levels of satisfaction in the south area of the Lake. Survey respondents on the north and east sides of the lake tend to have lower levels of satisfaction, particularly in the spring and summer. Respondents from the west have the lowest levels of satisfaction in fall and winter.

### Feedback on the Rule Curve

Survey participants were asked whether or not they agree with the seasonal operating objectives outlined in the Rule Curve <sup>4</sup>. Feedback was mixed with about one-third of respondents agreeing with the seasonal operating objectives, one-third disagreeing with seasonal operating objectives, and the other third unsure. Feedback on the website regarding the Rule Curve was also mixed, with a couple people looking to assess and/or change the Rule Curve, while one person was in support of following the Rule Curve.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	33.87%	21
No	33.87%	21
Unsure	32.26%	20
<b>Total</b>		<b>62</b>

The submission received from the Roundtable on Lake Health for Lake Bernard, while not providing a rating, does state that the current rule curve (i.e., water levels) is generally satisfactory as long as it is carefully respected in the operations of the dam. A copy of the submission is provided in **Appendix G**.

The written submission from the Tri-Council asks for a 5-Year review of the parameters of the rule curve. This written submission is provided in **Appendix H**.

<sup>4</sup> The Rule Curve outlines current seasonal operating objectives with respect to water levels of Lake Bernard.

## Concerns About Water Levels

Most engagement participants, including 48 survey respondents (or 79%), indicated that they are concerned about changes/risks to water levels. Concerns expressed by participants regarding water levels generally fall into four key themes:

1. Shoreline Erosion
  - a. Significant concerns about shoreline erosion and property damage linked to high water levels in the spring and ice push/build-up.
  - b. Loss of beach/property/trees reported by many residents.
2. Water Quality and Lake Health
  - a. Decline in water quality including increases in blue-green algae and invasive species (phragmites).
  - b. Impact on fish habitats, fish species and ecology of the lake.
  - c. Beaver dams impeding outflows from Lake Bernard.
3. Inconsistent Water Levels
  - a. Low water levels in the summer hindering recreational activities such as boating.
  - b. High winter water levels causing ice damage.
  - c. Logs being put in dam before ice is off the Lake.
4. Communication and Management
  - a. Desire for more information on water level management practices.
  - b. Enhanced responsiveness and more frequent communication with MNR.
  - c. Consistent application of rule curve and previously agreed upon approaches to managing the dam.

Importantly, some survey respondents (11) indicated they do not currently have concerns about water levels on Lake Bernard.

As noted above, there is concern from engagement participants regarding logs being put in the dam before the ice is off the Lake. This was a broad concern raised throughout all engagement activities. There is general consensus that the logs should be kept out until the ice is melted/gone. The written submissions from the Tri-Council and the Round Table on Lake Health also emphasize this.

Some further details on concerns are provided on the following page. These results are based solely on survey results.

### **Concerns by area**

Looking more closely at concerns by Lake area (north, east, south, west): 10 respondents from the east (out of a total of 12 respondents from the east) reported having concerns about water levels, in the north 23 (out of 28) respondents expressed concerns, in the south all respondents (4 in total) indicated that they have concerns, and 12 people (out of 17) from the west reported having concerns about water levels.

For those survey respondents who did have concerns, there were some notable variations by area. For example, the most common concern raised by survey respondents in the north include shoreline erosion, property damage and loss of beach due to high water levels (n=14). For people in the east, the most common concern was low water levels (mainly reported in the summer) (n=6). For the survey respondents in the south, concerns were mixed with a couple respondents expressing concerns for high water levels. In the west, the most common concern was shoreline erosion (n=3).

For all areas, concerns were raised regarding further shoreline erosion and property damage as well as the overall health/quality of the water. Survey responses from all areas also highlighted the need to balance water levels so that they are high enough for boats and recreational purposes in the summer, but low enough that they are not causing property and shoreline damage in the spring.

### **Concerns for property owners with shoreline**

28 survey respondents who identified as property owners with shoreline indicated that they have experienced challenges. Of these, 25 reported having shoreline damage. Property owners also reported challenges with high water (11), and with low water (13).

### **Concerns from business owners**

For the survey respondents who identified as local business owners (2), both expressed concerns with current water levels. Concerns identified include further shoreline erosion and ice damage, and loss of beach, if current dam operations continue. Other concerns expressed were a lack of communication and transparency from MNR.



## Priorities and Future Preferences

The following section highlights overall priorities based on all engagement activities.

The highest priority among engagement participants is the health and sustainability of the Lake<sup>5</sup>. Maintaining the Lake's ecological balance is seen as overriding, with a strong emphasis on preventing shoreline erosion and protecting natural habitats and species. Participants also advocate for water levels that support recreational activities such as boating and swimming, and ways of naturalizing shorelines.

Additionally, there is an emphasis on ensuring water management decisions are guided by scientific expertise, ensuring that best practices are followed to preserve the Lake's long-term sustainability, and sharing this information with community members so there is some understanding of who is taking what actions and why. Community engagement activities highlight that while many residents and groups seemed informed about the history and ecology of the lake, there is a need for continued sharing of information by MNR to ensure transparency in water level management practices and decisions.

A few participants (approximately 4-5) suggested removing the dam altogether and allowing natural processes to prevail.

Desired changes for future water management practices, suggested by engagement participants include:

- Lowering water levels in winter and spring to minimize ice damage and shoreline erosion.
- Maintaining or increasing water levels in the summer for recreational purposes.
- Pilot projects to test new water level management practices, including consideration and evaluation of removing the dam.
- Keeping logs out of the dam until after ice is out of lake.
- Mechanisms to enhance information sharing and communication between community and MNR.

While there is no clear consensus on desired water levels, there is consistency, among engagement participants, in the desire to maintain a healthy lake for both current and future generations, and for enhanced interactions between community and MNR.

The written submission by the Tri-Council, put forward additional recommendations for the management of water levels, including an annual creel census, training for lakefront owners and municipal staff/councillors, and sharing of historical data. These recommendations are outlined in **Appendix H**.

<sup>5</sup> This was the top priority based on survey results and further reflected in all other engagement activities.

## Communication and Engagement

Throughout the engagement process, a recurring theme was the need for improved communication and transparency from MNR. Engagement participants, including the local municipalities, throughout all engagement activities, expressed a desire for more communication from MNR about water level management practices. There were several suggestions for more regular updates, public engagement, and further communication of water level management decisions. Enhanced communication is seen by participants as essential for building trust and fostering a meaningful relationship with MNR.



## Indigenous Engagement Feedback

While there was limited discussion with representatives from Indigenous communities <sup>6</sup>, the conversation that did take place was generally reflective feedback heard at other engagement activities, highlighting the priority for water health in managing water levels on the Lake. This area was recognized as a traditional fishing ground, and as such the preservation of fish species and habitat and ecological sustainability was top of mind. There was a question as to the ecological purpose of the dam, and whether it serves longer term environmental sustainability needs, particularly in light of changing (harsher and more unpredictable) weather conditions.



<sup>6</sup> As noted previously, conversations were held with one First Nation Community (Wasauksing First Nation). This conversation was conducted by phone.

## 4.0 Remaining Questions

As part of the Engage Lake Bernard project goal of providing opportunity for information sharing between MNR and the community of interest, a list of questions has been collected from engagement participants throughout all engagement activities. Questions raised by engagement participants have been grouped by theme and shared below.

### Water Levels:

- Why are water levels increasing? Why does the lake water need to be so high?
- Why was water raised to optimal level in 2008?
- What are the impacts of water levels on blue-green algae (i.e., what do higher/lower water levels mean for blue-green algae)?
- How do water levels impact the ecology of the lake, and how do they impact fish habitats?
- Is shoreline erosion due to ice damage from too high lake levels, or is it due to natural erosion over time just based on wave action?

### Management Practices:

- Why is the current rule curve important?
- How was the management plan developed?
- What data is used to determine when logs go in and out?
- Why were logs placed in the lake in March 2024?
- How often and where on the lake are water levels monitored? Where are results posted?
- Does MNR observe the lake level in real-time, or do they just manage the logs in and out based on a fixed schedule not tied to lake level?
- How is MNR accountable to the agreements they have signed?
- What if there was no dam?

#### Engagement and Communication:

- What is the purpose of the consultations?
- How will the survey results be used?
- What influence do the facilitators (consultants) have?
- When will property owners receive the (engagement) report?
- Who is receiving information from this engagement? What will MNR do with the engagement feedback? What about previous letters and submissions?
- How can I provide comments on the Water Management on Lake Bernard Background Report?
- What 'other' information is being collected to inform next steps of water level management? How will this information be shared?

#### Shoreline and Property:

- Are residents permitted to stabilize their shoreline?
- Are there guidelines to mitigate shoreline damage?
- How can we prevent/reduce erosion to the shoreline?

#### Historical and Contextual:

- What is the history of the dam, and why was it put in initially?
- Is there an opportunity to create better awareness as to how Lake Bernard feeds the entire watershed and how it's impacting the Almaguin watershed?

#### Recreation:

- Why is accommodating big boats a priority?

## 5.0 Summary of Participant Insights

The qualitative data collected through various engagement methods provides a greater understanding of concerns, priorities, and experiences. A summary of participant's insights is provided below.

### Deep Emotional and Historical Connections

Many participants have a long-standing, emotional connection to Lake Bernard, with some having ties to the lake for decades. These connections underscore the importance of the lake in their personal and family histories. Participants shared stories of family gatherings, recreational activities, and personal milestones associated with the lake, highlighting its significance.

### Concerns About Water Levels

Overall, most people who engaged in the Lake Bernard Engagement project expressed concerns with water levels. Common concerns include:

- **Shoreline Erosion & Damage:** Many respondents expressed concerns about shoreline erosion and property damage, particularly due to high water levels in the spring and ice push. This was a particularly common theme among property owners on the north side of the Lake.
- **Water Quality:** Concerns about the decline in water quality, including increases in blue-green algae and invasive species, were frequently mentioned. Participants emphasized the need to prioritize the ecological health of the Lake.
- **Inconsistent Water Levels:** There was notable dissatisfaction with the inconsistent water levels, particularly the low levels in summer that hinder recreational activities and the high levels in winter causing ice damage.



## Priorities for Future Water Management

There is agreement among engagement participants that ecological sustainability of the Lake is the priority and should be the main consideration in future water level management. The primary priority for many participants is the long-term health and sustainability of Lake Bernard. This includes maintaining stable water levels to prevent further shoreline erosion and protecting fish habitats and overall lake ecology.

Ensuring that water levels support recreational activities such as boating, swimming, and fishing is also a significant priority. There is a desire for balanced water management that accommodates both ecological and recreational needs.

There is also strong call for greater community involvement in water management decisions. Participants would like more transparency and regular updates from MNR to build trust and create a greater understanding of current water level management practices.

In conclusion, the feedback from the engagement participants underscores the importance of water management practices that prioritize the long-term health of the lake, while also mitigating loss and damage of property, and balancing the desire for recreational activities on the lake.

## 6.0 Research Limitations

While the engagement process for the Lake Bernard project aimed to be comprehensive and inclusive, there are limitations that may impact the robustness of the findings.

### Limited Sample Size and Participation

- **Survey Responses:** Although 62 surveys were completed, the sample size may not be representative of the entire Lake Bernard community. The survey heard from approximately 40 property owners with shoreline out of a total of approximately 330 property owners. This response provides valuable insights but may not represent the population with high statistical confidence.
- **Coffee Conversations Attendance:** Participation in the coffee conversations, both in-person and virtual, was modest, with approximately 24 people attending the in-person session and 20 attending the virtual session. While capturing many valuable and insightful stories and experiences, this attendance may not capture the full diversity of opinions and experiences in the community.

### Geographic and Demographic Representation

- **Geographic Distribution:** Feedback indicated that participants were primarily from the north and west sides of the Lake. This geographic concentration may not fully represent concerns and experiences of residents from other areas, such as the south and east sides.
- **Demographic Diversity:** The engagement process may not have fully captured the views of all demographic groups, including younger residents, seasonal visitors, and Indigenous communities. Efforts to engage First Nations and Métis communities yielded limited direct feedback, which is an important consideration for future engagement efforts.

### Communication and Outreach Challenges

- **Awareness and Participation:** Despite extensive outreach efforts, some community members may not have been aware of or able to participate in the engagement activities.
- **Engagement Fatigue:** There may be a degree of engagement fatigue among residents due to ongoing discussions and previous consultations about water levels. This could result in lower participation rates.

## 7.0 Conclusions

Overall, the Engage Lake Bernard Project heard from about 80-90 Lake Bernard property owners, lake users, and other local interested parties. Engagement activities were successful in hearing from residents from all around the Lake as well as several businesses and organizations. There was ongoing engagement from the Village of Sundridge, Township of Strong, and the Lake Bernard Property Owners Association.

The survey provided an opportunity to hear from individuals not already engaged in discussions on Lake Bernard water levels and generate greater awareness and access to information on current water level management practices. In addition, property owners and broader community members were able to share photos and stories through the Engage Lake Bernard website as a community to further understand local context and diverse perspectives.

In addition, the engagement process demonstrates MNR's commitment to listening to experiences and concerns, and sharing information back with the community.

The qualitative data collected through various engagement methods provided a deeper understanding of community concerns, priorities, and experiences.

As noted in the discussion above, there are several key themes to emerge through engagement activities and conversations, these include:

- Many engagement participants have long-standing ties to Lake Bernard.
- Most engagement participants, including about 80% of survey respondents, express some concern over water levels on Lake Bernard.
- Water level satisfaction rates averaged at about 3 out of 5 for survey respondents.
- Overarching concerns related to water level management for engagement participants include:
  - Shoreline erosion mainly due to high water levels in the spring and ice push, in particular for property owners in the north side of the Lake.
  - Decline in water quality, including increases in blue-green algae.
  - Low water levels in the summer affecting recreational activities.
- There is general agreement that logs should not be placed in the dam until the ice is out. Although less specific, there is a general sense that logs should come out after Labour Day in September or sometime mid-September.
- The long-term health and sustainability of the Lake is top priority for engagement participants.
- Engagement participants are seeking greater communication with MNR. The local municipalities also express the desire for greater communication and information sharing with MNR.
- Engagement participants noted that the project website is helpful for information sharing.



## Appendix A: Coffee Conversation Presentation Slides



Photo credit: Andrea Jantzi

### Engagement on Lake Bernard Water Levels

Coffee Conversations  
May 1 (virtual)  
May 4 (in person)  
Hosted by J Consulting Group

### Purpose of Engagement

- Over time, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR) has heard some concerns about water levels on Lake Bernard.
- In the summer of 2023, MNR committed to initiating engagement with all Lake Bernard users.
- J Consulting Group is facilitating a series of engagement activities – website, coffee conversations, community visit, survey ([engagelakebernard.ca](http://engagelakebernard.ca))
- Seeking diverse interests, concerns, and observations about water levels throughout the year.
- Information will help guide MNR on next steps in managing water levels on Lake Bernard.







## It's Been a Wet Spring. This Engagement Is About Next Steps, Big Picture

- It has been a wet spring
  - April has been a wetter month than average
  - We know water levels are high as with much of central Ontario
- This engagement is about next steps – big picture
  - We're here to discuss how water levels are managed on Lake Bernard throughout the course of a year



## Themes We've Heard So Far

### Water level management

Requests for additional information about:

- MNR's priorities for water level management on Lake Bernard
- Science and information collected by MNR to manage water levels on Lake Bernard
- Establishment of the current operating plan and rule curve
- Timing of log insertion this year

(Note: some of this information has been provided in *Water Management on Lake Bernard Background Report, 2024*)

### Sentiments:

- Dissatisfaction with water level management, shoreline erosion, communication.
- Have not had issues with water levels so far.







## Themes We've Heard So Far

### Engagement

Interest expressed in:

1. Use of information collected through this engagement.
2. MNR's commitment for reporting on this process.
3. Methods for letting people in the community know about this engagement.
4. Providing comments on the *Water Management on Lake Bernard Report, 2024*.



## Key Questions for Today

### Connection with the lake

- a. What is your connection to Lake Bernard

### Water level satisfaction

- a. What is your general level of satisfaction with water levels?
- b. Can you recall a specific time when you were not satisfied with water levels on the lake?
- c. Can you recall a specific time when you were satisfied with water levels on the lake?

### Future water level management

- a. What are your priorities for water level management?
- b. What changes would you like to see in the future to match your priorities?

### Questions & communication

- a. Co-create a list of questions.
- b. What is the best way to get information out to people regarding water levels and any changes in water management?

# Thank You!

- Survey is open until May 9th
- Go to our project page:  
[engagelakebernard.ca](http://engagelakebernard.ca)
- Or scan the QR code
  
- [info@engagelakebernard.ca](mailto:info@engagelakebernard.ca)
- 905-399-5634
- 877-825-9870



## Appendix B: Community Outreach Poster

**Engagement on Lake Bernard water levels has started.  
We want to hear from you!**



Photo credit: Andrea Jantzi

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR) has been listening to comments about water levels on Lake Bernard and is committed to engaging with Lake users.

J Consulting is facilitating a series of engagement activities to capture the diverse opinions of the Lake Bernard community. Join a virtual or in person coffee house discussion and complete an online survey. Your feedback is welcome and important.

**Learn more and get in touch at:**



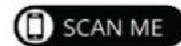
[engagelakebernard.ca](https://engagelakebernard.ca)



[info@engagelakebernard.ca](mailto:info@engagelakebernard.ca)



905-399-5634 or 877-825-9870



We'd appreciate it if you'd help get the word out. Invite your friends and neighbours to participate in this conversation.

## Appendix C: Community Outreach List

### Municipal Stakeholders

Village of Sundridge

Township of Strong

### Indigenous Communities

Magnetawan First Nation

Henvey Inlet First Nation

Dokis First Nation

Shawanaga First Nation

Wasauksing First Nation

MNO Region 5

### Local Businesses

The Ridge Golf Club

SSJ Arena

Caswell Resort Hotel

Cooperhead Distillery

Double Decker Sundridge

Bray Motors

Foodland Sundridge

Stately Cottage Camping Cabin

Siesta Cabins

Kidds Home Hardware

Scotty Lake Tours

The Flower Garden

Lake Bernard Beach House

Sips Craft Beverages

89 Main

The Village Bins

Sundridge Pharmacy

### Community Organizations, Groups, and Clubs

Lake Bernard Property Owners Association (LBPOA)

Almaquin Highlands Chamber of Commerce

Near North Enviro-Education Centre (NNEEC)

Sundridge Horticultural Society

Hands Family Help Network

Almaguin Highlands Health Centre

## Appendix D: Survey Results by Question

Overall, 62 surveys were completed.

### Question 1: How long have you had a connection with or used Lake Bernard? (n=62)

The vast majority of surveys (47 respondents or 87%) were completed by respondents who have had a connection with Lake Bernard for more than 20 years, 4 respondents indicated a connection of between 11 and 20 years, and 4 respondents indicated a connection of 10 years or less.

### Question 2: What are the main ways that you connect with/use Lake Bernard? (n=62)

When asked how people connect with, or use, Lake Bernard, responses generally include:

- Cottage (40)
- Fishing (15)
- Boating (29)
- Swimming (28)
- Recreation (general) (18)
- Family gatherings/history (12)
- Seasonal use (25)
- Environmental/community use (6)

\*Respondents often indicated more than one way they connect with the Lake.

### Question 3: What do you value the most about your time in, on, and around the Lake? (n=61)

Responses provided about what people value most about the Lake include:

- Family time (22)
- Community (10)
- Clean water/healthy lake (22)
- Boating/water activities (18)
- Swimming (17)
- Natural environment (15)
- Relaxation/peace and quiet (12)
- Recreation (10)
- Scenic/beauty (12)
- Public access/access to the lake (3)



**Question 4: How satisfied are you with lake water levels in the spring? (n=60)**

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Weighted Average
★	30.00% 18	15.00% 9	25.00% 15	10.00% 6	20.00% 12	60	2.75

**Question 5: How satisfied are you with lake water levels in the summer? (n=61)**

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Weighted Average
★	18.03% 11	22.95% 14	31.15% 19	11.48% 7	16.39% 10	61	2.85

**Question 6: How satisfied are you with lake water levels in the fall? (n=61)**

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Weighted Average
★	18.03% 11	13.11% 8	39.34% 24	9.84% 6	19.67% 12	61	3.00

**Question 7: How satisfied are you with lake water levels in the winter? (n=60)**

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Weighted Average
★	21.67% 13	15.00% 9	31.67% 19	10.00% 6	21.67% 13	60	2.95

**Question 8: The Rule Curve outlines current seasonal operating objectives with respect to water levels of Lake Bernard. Do you agree with the seasonal operating objectives? (n=62)**

Feedback on the Rule Curve are mixed with about one-third of respondents agreeing with the seasonal operating objectives, one-third disagreeing with seasonal operating objectives, and the other third unsure.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	33.87%	21
No	33.87%	21
Unsure	32.26%	20
<b>Total</b>		<b>62</b>

For individuals who responded “no”, about half (11 respondents) said they want lower water levels in the winter and spring, 2 want lower water levels in the summer, about 7 respondents would like higher water levels in the summer. Two respondents noted that they were prefer to remove the dam.



### **Question 9: Are you concerned about changes/risks to water levels? (n=61)**

Overall, 79% (48 respondents) indicated that they are concerned about changes/risks to water levels.

Of the respondents who said they were concerned and provided additional comments (40), most indicated concerns regarding shoreline erosion causing shoreline and property damage, and overall loss of beach/property. Other key concerns include the health of the lake and impact on water quality, and low water levels in the summer for boating and fishing.

Looking at responses by area, the following highlights concerns raised by survey respondents by area:

#### North:

- Shoreline erosion, property damage, loss of beach (12)
- High water levels (2)
- Need for more clarity on water level management information
- Blue green algae, water quality/health (3)
- More timely response on raising and lower water levels
- Lower water levels in summer (4)

#### East:

- Low water levels (generally in summer) (6)
- Loss of fish
- Water quality (2)
- Shoreline erosion/damage (2)
- More research needed
- Need to balance water levels (i.e., high enough for boats, but low enough to minimize any damage to properties) (3)

#### South:

- Erosion, loss of beach due to high water levels
- High water levels and impact on Lake health
- Logs going in too early in the spring
- Keep at levels that prevent property damage and allow Lake to be enjoyed

West:

- Shoreline erosion, property damage (3)
- Low water levels in summer (2)
- Low water levels
- Water levels too high in winter (2)
- Health of the Lake (2)
- Low water levels
- Need for shoreline mitigation strategies
- Maintain water levels (2)
- Poor dam management (2)

**Question 10: Please explain what is working for you and what you find challenging about water levels on Lake Bernard. (n=54)**

This open-ended question provided a range of insights and viewpoints about water levels on Lake Bernard. Responses are grouped by 'what is working' and 'what are the challenges', as well as be general themes.

What is Working

- General satisfaction/no issues (10)
- Specific points of satisfaction (3)
- Satisfaction with shallow water for swimming in summer (2)

What are the Challenges

- Shoreline erosion/ice damage (12)
- Unsatisfaction with high water levels (7)
- Unsatisfaction with low water levels in summer (8)
- Boating and docking issues (6)
- Water quality concerns (3)
- Communication issues (6)
- Other (4)

**Question 11: If you recall a specific date or timeframe where you experienced preferred water levels or challenges with water levels, please let us know. (n=34)**

Overall, 9 respondents recalled positive periods of time. There is little consistency in time periods ranging from “50 years ago” to “in the 70s and 80s” to “prior to 2015”. Respondents (9) recalling negative periods of time generally responded with “every spring”, or time periods within the last 2-10 years. Other responses were more general and did not reflect specific timeframes.

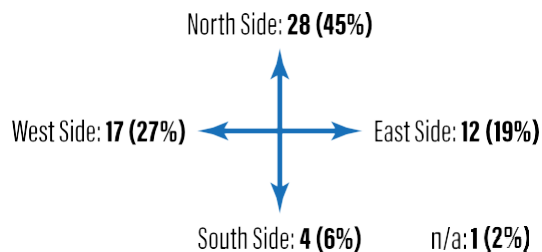
**Question 12: What are your priorities/hopes for water levels on Lake Bernard in the next 5 years? (n=58)**

Priorities can be grouped into the following categories:

- Lake Health (16)
- Maintain current water levels (7)
- Increase water levels, mainly in summer (8)
- Lower water levels, mainly in spring (7)
- Keep water levels consistent/stable (9) (sense among some that this will keep water healthier)
- Use expert/scientific guidance (3)
- Address specific responses (7)
- Other (1)

In looking at priorities addressing specific issues, many of these responses reflected the importance of mitigating or minimizing ice damage (3).

**Question 13: Where are you located in relation to Lake Bernard (n=62)**



**Question 14: Which areas of the lake do you interact with? (n=62)**

Approximately half (48%) of respondents indicated interacting with all areas of the Lake, and almost all respondents indicated interacting with the north side of the Lake (84%).

### Question 15: During which seasons do you interact with the Lake? (n=62)

Nearly all respondents (61) indicated that they interact with the Lake in the summer. Most respondents indicated that they interact with the Lake in the fall (55), as well as the spring (50), with the fewest (34) indicated that they interact with the Lake in the winter.

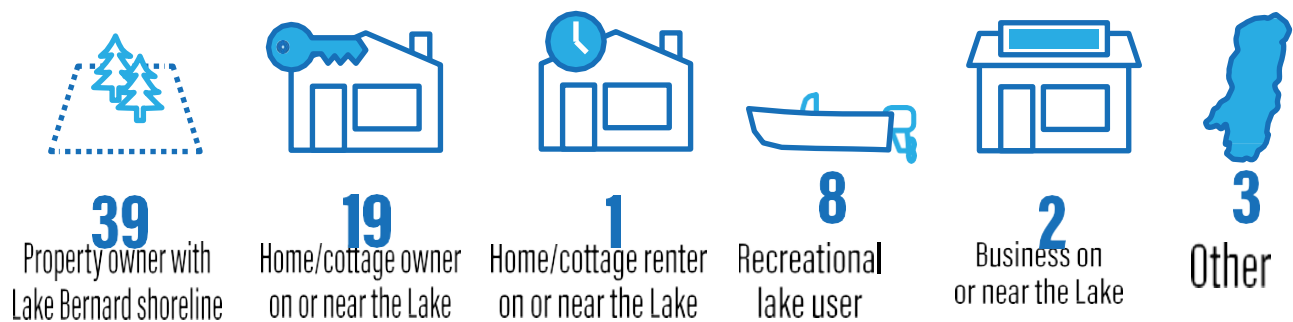
Overall, just under half of respondents (47%) indicated that they interact with the Lake during all seasons.

### Question 16: During the seasons mentioned in the previous answer, how often do you interact with the Lake? (n=62)

Most people (56%) interact daily with the Lake, some (21%) reported interacting weekly, and several (6%) reported interacting with the Lake monthly. Other responses included 'weekends' and 'summers'.

### Question 17 Are you a? (n=61)

Most people responding to the survey were either a property owner with Lake Bernard shoreline (39) or a home/cottage owner on or near the lake (19).



Property owners with Lake Bernard Shoreline were asked 6 additional questions (Questions 18-23) about their property.

### Question 18: What is the nature of your shoreline (n=36)

Most property owners with shoreline indicated that their shoreline was primarily sandy.

- Sandy (26)
- Rocky (2)
- Mostly rocky with some sand (3)
- Both (4)
- Other (1)

**Question 19: Have you taken steps to mitigate shoreline damage? If yes, what steps have you taken? (n=36)**

Of people responding to this question, 20 stated that they have taken steps to mitigate shoreline damage.

Shoreline damage steps noted by survey respondents include use of rocks or rock walls (11), keeping property natural (6), tree and shrub planting (4)

A couple respondents indicated that they had hired professional help.

**Question 20: Have you experienced challenges related to your property?**

Of the 39 survey respondents who identified as property owners with Lake Bernard Shoreline, 28 indicated that they have experienced challenges related to their property. 8 stated that they do not have challenges related to their property and 3 did not respond to this question.

Of these property owners with shoreline who responded that they have experienced challenges, 25 indicated that they have challenges relate to shoreline erosion. 13 responded that they have challenges with low water levels, and 9 responded that they have challenges with high water levels.

**Question 21: If yes, how would you describe the challenges you are experiencing?**

Of the 28 property owners with shoreline who indicated that they have experienced challenges, 25 reported having shoreline damage. Property owners also reported challenges with high water (11), and with low water (13). Other challenges noted include phragmites (2).

**Question 22: If you have had challenges related to your property, you are welcome to attach photos.**

5 photos were submitted.

**Question 23: Is there additional information that could help keep you informed about how water levels are managed? (n=33)**

Some respondents indicated that it would be helpful to have a website or some type of information portal (5), some are looking for more information from MNR when levels are changed (4), and a couple are looking for more technical data (2).

Most respondents to this question provided more general feedback including a desire for more frequent information (5). Several respondents also noted that they receive information from the LBPOA which is very helpful (3).

**Question 24: A project website has been launched. On the website there is a Resource Room where you can download Ministry resources about where level management on Lake Bernard. Have you visited the site? (n=59)**

Twenty-five respondents indicated that they have visited the website.

**Question 25: What resources have you checked out? (n=31)**

Of the 25 people who indicated that they had visited the site, 23 indicated that they had checked out at least one resource from the resource room. Most people who said they visited the site look at all or most of the resources in the Resource Room.

- None of the above (8\*)
- Magnetawan River Water Control Operating Plan (18)
- Lake Bernard Dam Operation Manual (extracted) (19)
- Best Management Practice Target Line (19)
- Lake Bernard Background Report (20)

\*Of note, 6 respondents who indicated that they had not visited the site in Question 25, all responded to Question 26 by indicated 'none of the above'.

**Question 26: What is one of your main take takeaways from the resources shared? (n=21)**

Takeaways described by survey respondents include:

- Informative (4)
- Still absorbing information (2)
- Criticism of MNR and/or resources (5)
- Consider other options/review plan (4)
- Other (5)



**Question 27: If you have read the Lake Bernard Background Report, and thinking about how you use the lake, please rank (on a scale of 1-5) the following interests/objectives in order of priority. (n=31\*)**

Of the people who responded to this question, ecology ranked as the top priority.

This is followed closely by recreation activities/navigation.

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Score
Recreational activities/ navigation	32.26% 10	22.58% 7	22.58% 7	22.58% 7	0.00% 0	31	3.65
Ecology/fishery (e.g., Lake Trout)	16.53% 5	54.84% 17	25.81% 8	3.23% 1	0.00% 0	31	3.84
Mitigation of shoreline erosion/ice push	19.35% 6	19.35% 6	16.53% 5	38.71% 12	6.45% 2	31	3.06
They are all equally important	19.35% 6	3.23% 1	19.35% 6	22.58% 7	35.48% 11	31	2.48
Another priority	12.90% 4	0.00% 0	16.53% 5	12.90% 4	58.06% 18	31	1.97

\*Of note, some people who may not have read the Lake Bernard Background Report did respond to this question.

**Question 28: If you responded 'another priority' to question 27, please explain here. (n=8)**

Other priorities outlined mainly include the need for more education, and concerns about algae blues. Several respondents confirmed their sentiments that the health/long-term sustainability of the lake should be the highest priority.

**Question 29: Was the information in the Lake Bernard Background Report (March 2024) useful to you? (n=25\*)**

Most people responding to this question (16) indicated that the Background Report was useful. Five noted it was not helpful. Two comments indicated that respondents found information inaccurate. One comment indicated that more information would be helpful.

\*Of note, one person indicated in their response that they had not read the Report.

**Question 30: Is there any other information that you'd like to share about lake water levels or your overall experience on Lake Bernard? (n=35)**

Thirty-five people responded to this question. Overall, responses emphasized earlier comments and highlighted key priorities for Lake users. Responses include:

- Concern for water quality (5)
- Appreciation for engagement process (4)
- Concern for shoreline changes/erosion (6)
- Call for action (5)
- Water level preferences (7)
- Support for continued monitoring (2)
- No additional comments (5)
- Other (6)

## Appendix E: Summary of Coffee Conversations

### Summary of In-Person Coffee Conversation

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, approximately 24 Lake Bernard community members gathered at the Near North Enviro-Education Centre to discuss their experiences and viewpoints regarding water levels on Lake Bernard.

Participants were provided with a brief introduction to the engagement project and invited to participate in a series of small group discussions. Each participant was provided with a booklet to record their own responses to the group discussion questions. Most people completed a booklet but not all, and not all questions included a response. Facilitators also took notes of the group discussions.

Results from these conversations is provided below.

#### **Question 1: What is your connection to Lake Bernard?**

All coffee conversation participants, who completed a feedback booklet, indicated that they were either a resident, property owner, or cottager. Many indicated being long-time residents or cottagers, many with previous generations on the Lake.

By area, there was a mix of residents from the north (6), east (2) and west (9). No participants, who completed a booklet, identified as being from the south. Three people who completed a booklet did not identify the area that they were from.

#### **Question 2: What do you value most about your time in, on and around the Lake?**

Responses about what people value include:

- Recreation (beach, swimming)
- Fishing
- Clean water
- Open space, fresh air, tranquility
- Scenery, natural environment
- Sense of community, neighbours
- Time with family

### Question 3: What is your current level of satisfaction with water levels?

The following Table shows the variations in level of satisfaction by season. Generally, rates of satisfaction are slightly higher in the winter, with lower levels of satisfaction in the other seasons.

	Very Unsatisfied	Unsatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Fall	9	1	2	4	2
Winter	5	3	2	2	6
Spring	9	1	2	4	2
Summer	9	2	4	2	1

Reasons provided for why people are unsatisfied with water levels include experiences of shoreline erosion and shoreline damage, low water levels in the summer, high water levels in winter and damage from ice, high water levels impacting quality of lake, lack of consistency with water level management, and the blockage of fish spawning group.

### Question 4: Do you have concerns about current water levels?

Participants expressed several concerns. Concerns generally fall into the following categories:

- Shoreline erosion, shoreline damage, loss of property/beach
- Quality of water, health/ecology of the lake, loss of fish habitats
- Water too high in winter
- Water too shallow in summer
- Timing of log placement

### Question 5:

**a) Can you recall a time when you were satisfied with water levels on the Lake?**

**b) Can you recall a time when you were not satisfied with water levels on the Lake?**

Generally, participants express being more satisfied years ago, often time-periods prior to 2008, with less satisfaction in more recent years (2022 to current).

### **Question 6: What are your priorities for water level management?**

Priorities identified by participants include:

- Reducing water levels
- Increasing responsiveness to water level concerns
- Improved relationship with MNR
- Maintaining water levels for recreation use
- Long-term health of the lake, clear water
- Avoid further loss of land, damage

### **Question 7: What changes would you like to see, if any, in the future to match your priorities?**

Changes suggested include:

- Removal of the dam
  - Concern that this might make lake smaller
- Enhanced communication and attentiveness of MNR, collaboration with and among residents
- More expertise in dam management
- Deeper water in summer
- Honoring commitments by MNR
- Flexibility in managing logs

**Question 8: Are there any questions you have about water level management on Lake Bernard?**

- Why does the lake water need to be so high?
- Why is the current rule curve important/being used?
- Will MNR pay attention to these concerns?
- How often are water levels monitored?
- Where are results posted?
- Where on the lake are water levels measured?
- When will property owners receive the report (consultation report)?
- Why are water levels increasing?
- How do water levels impact ecology of the lake, how do they impact fish habitats?
- How can we prevent/reduce erosion to shoreline?
- Why was water raised to optimal level in 2008?
- Why is accommodating big boats a priority?
- Why were logs placed in lake in March 2024?
- Is the Ministry creating conflict between property owners?
- How was the management plan developed?
- What if there was no dam?
- When will the Ministry make a decision/take next steps?

**Question 9: What is the best way to get information out to you about water levels and any changes in water level management?**

For the most part, people are looking for information by email. Other preferences including posting information in the community, through municipalities, on the website, and having more coffee meetings.



## Summary of Virtual Coffee Conversation

In addition to the in-person coffee conversation, a virtual session was held on May 1<sup>st</sup> via Zoom. Twenty participants joined the evening conversation, a few of which also participated in the in-person session.

Participants were provided with a brief introduction to the engagement project and invited to participate in a series of small group discussions using three Zoom break-out rooms. Participants were engaged in conversations within their 'rooms' and feedback was captured either by participants directly posting feedback to the Jamboard, or by the room facilitator. Results from these conversations is provided below.

### **Question 1: What is your connection to Lake Bernard?**

Feedback from the three breakout rooms highlight a mix of connections. Most participants had long-time connections to the Lake. Participants described having family ties to the area and generational connections. Participants self-identified as both permanent property owners and recreational visitors.

### **Question 2: What do you value most about your time in, on and around the Lake?**

Responses to this question often reflected the natural surroundings, enjoying recreational activities, and connection to the community and family:

- Natural beauty and tranquility
- Recreational opportunities (swimming, boating, fishing)
- Family time and sense of community
- Clear water, scenic views, and clean environment
- Wildlife and the opportunity to unwind

### **Question 3: What is your current level of satisfaction with water levels?**

While it was not always clear where on the Lake participants live/visit, there are some general findings from these conversations:

- Generally, a higher level of satisfaction with winter and fall levels
- Generally, a higher level of satisfaction from residents/lake users from the west-side of the Lake, and lower levels of satisfaction from lake users on the north-end of the Lake
- Mixed feedback on spring levels, with more concerns from residents/lake users on north-end
- Summer levels often seen as too low, affecting recreational activities

#### **Question 4: What are your priorities for water level management?**

Participants identified many priorities for water level management, which can be summarized as:

- Preventing shoreline erosion and flooding
- Ensuring environmental sustainability, keeping health of the water, and protecting natural habitats
- Maintaining water levels for recreational activities
- Balancing recreational needs with environmental protection
- Stable water levels year-round
- Responsive communication with MNR

#### **Question 5: What changes would you like to see, if any, in the future to match your priorities?**

A summary changes participants are seeking include:

- Better regulation of summer water levels
- Improved communication with MNR
- Regular assessments of lake health
- Keep logs out until after ice is out (i.e., May, April 30<sup>th</sup>, middle of May), and begin draw down after Labour Day
- Provide community with some control over water levels (mixed views)
- Enhanced monitoring

## **Question 6: Are there any questions you have about water level management on Lake Bernard?**

Questions raised by participants include:

- Are residents permitted to stabilize their shoreline?
- Would like guidelines to mitigate shoreline damage.
- Does MNR observe the lake level in real time, or do they just manage the logs in and out based on a fixed schedule not tied to lake level?
- Is shoreline erosion due to ice damage from too high lake levels or is it due to natural erosion over time just based on wave action?
- Is the Ministry listening?
- How is MNR accountable to the agreements they have signed?
- How will the survey be used?
- What influence to the facilitators have?
- What data is used to determine when logs go in and out
- Is there an opportunity to create better awareness as to how Lake Bernard feeds the entire watershed and how its impacting the Almaguin watershed?
- Are there other ways to asses ice?

## **Question 7: What is the best way to get information out?**

Suggestions for getting information out include:

- Email
- Website
- Local paper (i.e., North Bay Nugget)
- Postings in Town (post office, Foodland)
- Hard copy

## Appendix F: Summary of Online Engagement

From February 16<sup>th</sup> to May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Lake Bernard community members and interested parties were invited to express their views and share their experiences regarding water levels on Lake Bernard through the Engage Lake Bernard project website. Through the 'Info Exchange' portion of the site, there were options to post a question and/or share experiences and photos. The site also included options to connect directly with the consulting team either through an online form, direct email, or telephone.

Online engage results include:

- Direct Emails: 19 emails from 17 individuals
- Online forms: 8 emails/forms from 4 individuals
- Posted Questions: 7 posts from 5 individuals
- Posted Experiences: 24 posts from 11 individuals
- Telephone Calls: 5 calls from 4 individuals

Overall, we heard from 22 different people in 75 interactions across email, telephone, and web posts.

For people who did engage through the website, feedback largely focused on individual experiences on the Lake, and those of their neighbours. Many people described their connection to the Lake and expressed concerns about water levels related to their property.

Much of the feedback received on the website was from people who are long-time residents/cottagers on the Lake. Postings were focused on sharing their connection and history to the Lake as well as outlining various concerns with water levels over the years. Nearly all individuals to post or email through the website describe having some sort of concern over water level management on the Lake. Many people described having concerns for many years, and some described concerns for decades. The online feedback emphasizes a sense of frustration by some community members resulting from ongoing loss/damage to property, a sense of deterioration of water quality, and further frustrations with lack of responses to date from MNR.

Feedback provided through online engagement, generally fall into the following four categories:

## Shoreline Erosion

The most common concern expressed by people through the online engagement was shoreline erosion. Concerns were expressed regarding the impact of erosion on property (land/beach, trees), as well as on the impact to water quality of the Lake.

Concerns regarding shoreline erosion are most often tied with comments and feedback regarding high water levels in the spring and ice push/build-up. A couple entries expressed frustration for logs going in early this year, with community members indicating that this goes against an existing agreement with MNR to not put the logs in prior to the ice being completing out of the Lake. Of note, a response was provided by MNR to this concern and posted on the project website.

A couple people did express that are not experiencing any impacts from water levels.

A few posts also commented on damage done to the (public) boat ramp, and that the foot bridge was in need of repairs.

## Water Quality/Health of the Lake

Many people identify a decline in water quality as a key issue with more specific concerns expressed related to increases in blue-green algae, loss of fish species, and increases in invasive species (phragmites). Many people emphasized the need to keep water quality as the priority when determining water levels. A few people expressed feeling that recreation activities are prioritized above the health of the lake when evaluating and determining water levels.

## Feedback and Questions on Engagement Process

Several people expressed gratitude for the engagement process and the opportunity to provide their feedback and share insights. Many questions were raised about the engagement process itself, including how the information collected would be used by MNR, and what 'other' information was being collected to inform next steps of water level management.

Some people were under the impression that the engagement was like a vote process. Concern was expressed that if there isn't 100% consensus from 100% of property owners that no changes would result. Concerns were also raised at the cost of the engagement process (i.e., taxpayer dollars), and that the small group discussion format of the coffee conversations meant that you could not hear everyone's opinions/views.

## Communication with MNR

As noted, there is a sense of frustration expressed by residents that concerns raised have not resulted in a response or changes.

Questions that people raised include:

- What are the impacts of water levels on blue-green algae (i.e., what do higher/lower water levels mean for blue-green algae?)
- What is the history of the dam, and why it was put in initially?
- How can I provide comments on the Water Management on Lake Bernard Background Report?
- How was the current operating plan established?
- What is the purpose of the Consultation?
- Who is receiving this information? What will MNR do with the engagement feedback? What about previous letters, submissions?
- What 'other' information is being collected to inform next steps of water level management? How will this information be shared?

Of note, there was a request early on the engagement process to add the Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act to the project webpage. Links were added to the site 'Resource Room' as a result of this request.

Also of note, all project page posts and submitted emails have been collected and shared with MNR including all photos that were shared either by email or through the website.



## Appendix G: Submission from Member of Round Table on Lake Health for Lake Bernard

May 12, 2024

MNR and J Consulting Submission on Lake Bernard Water Levels.

Submitted by Doug Cuthbert

Member of the Roundtable on Lake Health for Lake Bernard

I, Doug Cuthbert, have owned a summer cottage at the south east corner of Lake Bernard since 1977 and before that spent many summers at Bernard with family back to 1950.

I was a member of the Lake Bernard Property Owners' Association executive for two decades, 1970 to 1990. During that time and since then, I have been continually engaged in the Bernard water levels and management discussions including participation on the Lake Bernard Roundtable. I have university degrees in Civil and Water Resources engineering and spent a 40+ year career in the public and private sectors dealing with water resource issues.

During my tenure on the Lake Bernard Association executive, I and other Association members were in frequent contact with MNR technicians who monitored and operated the outlet control dam. Before the Water Survey of Canada installed the remotely accessible water level gauge, our Association operated in an early notice capacity to advise MNR of extreme water level fluctuations and the need to operate the dam valve and remove or replace stoplogs. During this time, we interacted with a succession of MNR water level technicians who were Amanda Vincent's predecessors and MNR actually gave the Association the authority to operate the dam's control valve as long as MNR were so advised.

The dotted line modification to the rule curve calling for a slow reduction in operating water target levels from early to late summer was a result of this Ministry/Lake Bernard Property Owners' Association interaction.

In my opinion, the current rule curve is generally satisfactory as long as it is carefully respected in MNR operations.

There are two key issues in Lake Bernard level management. The first is that dam stop logs should NOT be replaced in the dam following winter settings until the ice is off the lake in the spring – typically by the end of April. Otherwise, high spring water level increases can cause dangerous and very damaging shoreline conditions as the ice moves around and out of Bernard (aka Stirling) Creek below the dam to convey significant lake outflows. This can be exacerbated by the presence of beaver dams in the creek. In past years, Association representatives have inspected the creek during the fall between the dam and Robins Road bridge and removed beaver dams. Strong Township was successfully lobbied to remove beaver dams that repeatedly occurred under the Old Muskoka Road Bridge. This is no longer a problem at this location since this bridge was rebuilt a few years ago. But, beaver dams elsewhere on the creek remain an issue and impediment to high outflows from Lake Bernard.

Thank you to the MNR and J Consulting for offering this consultation opportunity.



## Appendix H: Submission from the Village of Sundridge, Township of Strong, and Township of Joly (Tri-Council)

July 8, 2024

Interim summary of the municipalities' position on current water level management practices:

1. The municipalities feel like the dam should be left wide open until the ice is either A) gone or B) rotten to the extent that it poses threat to causing shoreline damage. Note, this is on average (according to average historic date of logs in the dam and average day of ice off reported by MNR) 1 week later than normal or less\*. Probably could be more like 4-5 days later since we do not necessarily need the ice to come off, it just needs to be structurally deficient enough it causes no threat to the shorelines.
2. The logs need to be taken out of the dam by 3-4<sup>th</sup> week of September and left out until the time described in #1 above.
3. We would like to see the top of the summer TOZ reduced to 329.45, and the BMP target also reduced to 329.35.
  - After reviewing public feedback, no changes to the summer levels outlined in the rule curve (normal, target or best management practice) are proposed at this time (December 2024).
4. We would like to see historic data/surveys showing the original shoreline, its location today, and it modelled out in 25-year intervals so that we may see the future effects of shoreline erosion up to 100 years from now.
5. We would like to see a commitment that there will be 5-year revisitation of the parameters of the rule curves/dam operations, and build within the operating plan a provision that allows minor changes that are agreed upon by the LBPOA, the municipalities, and the MNR without the requirement of a full public consultation. A definition of minor changes could be "up to 5 cm changes to the rule curve parameters".
6. We would like MNR to make a commitment to provide work permit application training for lakefront owners and municipal/staff councillors a minimum of every 4 years, perhaps at Tri-Council.
7. We would like MNR commit to getting back to their responsibilities of annual creel census and report to the municipalities annually so that they have up to date information in terms of what species they need to manage water levels for, for e.g. it is largely believed that rainbow trout are extinct in Lake Bernard, yet to this day they are still considering that species in their dam operations.
8. We would like the Province to commit to acknowledge the efforts the LBPOA has made, through volunteers, to do water testing. And acknowledge the funding Sundridge and Strong has committed to water testing to establish baselines and analyze its current state. We would like MNR to review the data, and take over that water testing to assess and inform potential for public health threats, and commit to taking action that would have a positive impact on causing the reduction of deleterious inputs that are under the Province's

control such as road salt (which is under the control of the province through the MTO).

