

NEWS RELEASE

From the Brodhead Watershed Association

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, December 07, 2018

Download photos of the dry dam and plaque here: <https://1drv.ms/f/s!AlusXBzdArEwoRaLAlquaVwwi7S6>

Credit Carol Hillestad/BWA

Conservation district protects dry dams to protect lives

“It’s natural for creeks and rivers to flood,” Adam Schellhammer, manager of Monroe County Conservation District, said at a November meeting with interested citizens. “With rapid snow melt or heavy rains, creeks will flood. That’s only a problem when we humans put our houses and businesses in that floodplain.”

Schellhammer’s talk about the Leavitt Branch Dry Dam was sponsored by Brodhead Watershed Association. Twenty-five people attended the event at the Friendly Community Center in Mountainhome, followed by a visit to the dam.

This dam is one of two in Barrett Township, built in response to the Flood of 55. After a long drought, back-to-back hurricanes pummeled the Poconos in August 1955, and the Brodhead Creek and its tributaries became raging torrents. Dozens of people were swept to their deaths, and homes, businesses, bridges, railroads, and roads were destroyed throughout Monroe County. It took years and millions of dollars to recover.

According to Schellhammer, “The idea of a dry dam is to have an empty reservoir, ready to hold back floodwaters. Unfortunately, any time you dam a creek, no matter how good your intentions, you’re going to have to monitor, maintain, and renovate that structure, basically forever.”

Putting the dams on high headwaters of the Brodhead Creek protects life and property immediately downstream — and all along the creek’s course.

The conservation district takes care of the county’s two dry dams in Barrett. Combined, they can contain more than a trillion gallons of water. Every year, district staff cut woody brush from the dam and inspect dam structures to be sure they are secure.

“This year, we had several weather events with days of constant downpour,” Schellhammer said. “District staff and I monitored both dry dams throughout the storm events, watching the water. If it gets too high, we have to make a decision when to bring in emergency management and call for people downstream to evacuate.”

After the talk, the group visited the dam. Schellhammer pointed to an area of the spillway that had to be rebuilt after ATVs had destabilized the wall of the spillway, a potentially catastrophic situation.

Standing on the 88-foot-high dam, Schellhammer said, “There are better, cheaper ways to manage flood events than building and maintaining expensive dams. Guiding new development away from floodplains is one way.”

Allowing natural “structures” to do their job is the best, least costly way to protect against flood disasters. The Tannersville Cranberry Bog, for example, acts as an enormous, incredibly efficient sponge that retains water and naturally protects thousands of people, homes, and businesses downstream. Its flood and erosion protection have been recognized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, according to Schellhammer.

For security, dry dam land is not open to the public, except under strictly supervised and guided conditions.

The Get Outdoors Poconos hiking series is sponsored by Brodhead Watershed Association to encourage residents to find and enjoy trails on public land in our area, while learning how forested land protects our drinking water. For information, see brodheadwatershed.org/gopoconos.

Brodhead Watershed Association is a nonprofit environmental organization formed in 1989. BWA is dedicated to protecting and preserving water resources and the environment of the Brodhead watershed, and the water quality of the Brodhead, Cherry, Marshalls, McMichael, Paradise and Pocono creeks and their tributaries. BWA assists municipalities, residents, businesses and groups with protecting natural resources through education, workshops, seminars, public programs and stream monitoring. For information: info@brodheadwatershed.org or 570-839-1120.