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Cooling Off

Cornell attempts to scale back its monitoring of local lake source cooling

Cornell University's request to reduce monitoring at its Lake Source Cooling system has elicited strong cries of protest from the Tompkins County Environmental Review Committee (EMC), which are starting to be heard by both the Tompkins County Legislature and the City of Ithaca Common Council.

Cornell has asked the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to let it reduce the ambient water quality monitoring from eight to two stations. That's too much of a drawback too soon argues the EMC.

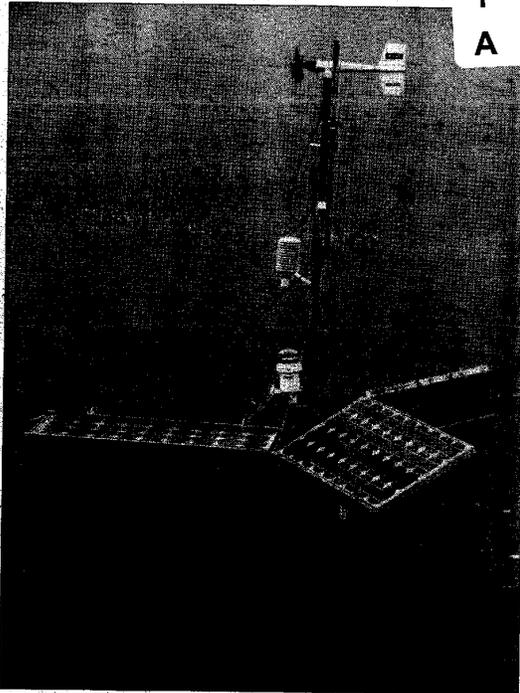
About a month ago, the EMC, an appointed advisory body to the County Legislature, sent a letter to the DEC expressing concern about Cornell's request. The EMC has been involved with the Lake Source Cooling Project since its inception and has followed the project closely since it went into operation.

In the letter, the EMC said that it strongly opposes Cornell's request. Only three of the five years of sampling originally agreed to by Cornell has been completed, the EMC pointed out. "Long-term analysis of the same testing sites will better enable the separation of impacts that are a result of the fluctuating natural environment from those that could be occurring as a result of LSC."

The EMC is also concerned that development at Cornell will add to the LSC system over the next several years, which is currently operating at only 40 percent of its State Pollution Discharge Elimination System (SPDES) authorized capacity.

Cornell has attributed spikes around monitoring site two to the proximity of the Ithaca Area Wastewater Treatment Plant (IAWWTP) outfall plume. Since the plant is in the process of implementing more stringent phosphorus controls, the EMC believes it prudent to continue monitoring the site closely to ascertain whether the IAWWTP is indeed the culprit.

"The current data is clearly not enough to support any conclusions that LSC has had no negative impacts on water quality. In the interests of the many municipalities that border on Cayuga Lake that are key stakeholders in maintaining water quality,



CORNELL UNIVERSITY MONITORS LAKE SOURCE COOLING IN CAYUGA LAKE THROUGH INSTRUMENTS SUCH AS THE ONE SHOWN ABOVE. THE INFORMATION OBTAINED THROUGH THE FLOATING MONITORS CAN BE VIEWED AT WWW.CAYUGALAKE.CORNELL.EDU.

PHOTO BY BOB BOLLIE

the monitoring should continue," the EMC's letter concluded.

There's always been "two sides of the coin on the issue" from an environmental perspective, EMC's Chairman Steve Uzmann noted. "On the positive side, you have a savings of energy, of fossil fuels and of money. On the negative side, there's the concern that it's upsetting the balance of the lake by moving nitrates to the surface."

The DEC oversees any activity that has the potential for negative impact on a body

of water. Cornell currently has a five-year SPDES for its LSC facility.

The EMC would like to see more, rather than fewer, monitoring sites, Uzmann said. "A big concern of ours is that there's no monitoring station near the outlet for the cooling system," he said.

The committee would also like to see Cornell extend, rather than shorten, its stint of monitoring. "What happens when the SPDES permit ends?" Uzmann asked. "There's no long-term water study in the

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southern basis of the lake. The data is invaluable. The longer you maintain the study, the more important the data."

Uzmann believes Cornell would benefit from the increased monitoring in the long run as well. "It behooves Cornell. If something goes wrong they could prove it wasn't their fault," he said.

The controversy has not yet reached Syracuse, which is in the planning stages for a similar facility using Lake Ontario. Neil Murphy, president of SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry has been working on a feasibility study for the Metropolitan Water Board.

"My understanding is that Cornell's system has exceeded expectations," including environmental ones, Murphy said.

Although Murphy hasn't seen any monitoring data from Cornell, he said that it makes sense to reduce monitoring if "the data is not telling a story."

"If the measurements are basically consistent, generally you can reduce monitoring," he said. "Besides the extent of variability that you're seeing, it also depends on how often the data is taken. And the number of data points."

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THE ITHACA FEED