

Incident, a "natural disaster", not reported to ANR, as required, due to streambed alteration requirements. All 4 culverts along Glen Falls Brook should have been replaced by bridges. Lost opportunity for financial assistance in replacement costs, far exceeding \$100,000 as of June, 2020.

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Published: 5/27/2016 12:14:04 AM

Modified: 5/27/2016 12:14:13 AM

Fairlee – The town of Fairlee has been investigating the cause of damage after a torrent of water cascaded down Glen Falls Brook into the west side of Lake Morey Monday morning, washing out culverts and eroding roads and property.

The perpetrators? Beavers – or the lack thereof. An abandoned beaver dam at the northwest edge of the Fairlee Town Forest gave way just before 9 a.m. Monday, Forest Committee Chairman David Matthews said. It rushed from its source down Glen Falls Brook, taking with it two dams downstream.

By the time the wall of water neared Lake Morey, it was four feet high and 12 feet wide, according to homeowner Ken LeClair.

“That was an active dam years ago,” said Town Administrator Brian Hanson. “Beavers are not adding to the dam the way they normally would be doing. Vegetation dies out, and the dam was just weak enough so that it let go.”

Lynne Fitzhugh, a Fairlee resident and a member of Friends of the Fairlee Town Forest, had initially been concerned that the breach may have been caused by unauthorized ATV riders who might have dislodged part of the dam. Now, no foul play is suspected, and there was no evidence of ATVs near the breached dam.

“This was an act of God more than vandalism or anything else,” Matthews said Thursday.

On Tuesday afternoon, the five members of the Fairlee Forest Committee and Hanson climbed up to the Brushwood South Wetlands, a 40-acre chain of stepped ponds and bogs with lots of beaver activity. It’s an area located at the northwest edge of the 1,500-acre parcel of town land, all of which is crisscrossed by snowmobile and hiking trails built from old logging roads.

They found that the breached dam had been weakened by disuse, and the source of the rupture was too far from trails to be considered suspicious. There’s no concern about ATV overuse or abuse, Matthews added.

The surge of water clogged and washed out three culverts and rendered roads impassable in a few places, Hanson said. All the damage occurred on town class 4 roads and trails in the Fairlee Town Forest, used

mainly by recreational walkers, bikers, and ATV riders.

No regularly traveled public roads were affected by the flooding, Hanson said. LeClair, who lost three feet of his front yard alongside Glen Falls Brook to erosion, was the only homeowner seriously affected, town officials said. A mat of logs and wood remains floating in Lake Morey and debris has washed up on the shore of various summer camps and private properties.

During that investigative hike, the Forest Committee approved the repairs of damages to the town forest. Matthews estimated that the cost of repairs would come to less than \$5,000. That money would be drawn from the Town Forest Fund.

"There will be no surprises for taxpayers," he said.

On Wednesday, crews restored the damaged culverts and Matthews said that by the end of Thursday, all trails should be repaired and accessible.

On June 6, the Fairlee Forest Committee will discuss the event with the Selectboard, present photographs of the area and offer an update on repairs.

"The first concern was to take care of access," said Selectboard Chairman Peter Berger. "In terms of preventative or next steps, that'll be discussed with the forest board when that conversation happens."

For now, Matthews has no intention of deconstructing or altering existing dams to prevent similar events going forward.

"The town wouldn't want to (intervene)," he said. "This is a natural occurrence. We know the coyotes eat the fawns and sometimes you just have got to let nature take it's course. It's not all bad."

Fitzhugh also visited the source of the flooding on Tuesday, climbing up to the site with her dog. She compared the damaged streambed of Glen Falls Brook to that following Tropical Storm Irene.

"It was completely scoured out," she said.

Fitzhugh agreed that there was little possibility of vandalism, but she pointed that there was no rain storm or flooding that would have increased pressure on the dam.

"It is very bizarre that it happened," she said, urging the town to continue looking into the incident.

Regardless, she said, the biggest victim was the land itself.

“With a tragedy like that, it’s not just the property damage that happens,” she said. “It’s the complete turnover of a wetland that took probably 70 years to develop.

“It’s a real jewel.”