

Part 3:

Historic floods inundate Midwest

***Northern Plains
fights steady advance
of Devils Lake***



Photo credit: Northern Plains

Lake-front property in the small town of Minnewaukan is not an asset, but rather a burden. The unwelcome waters of Devils Lake threaten the town's future. The lake has quadrupled in size since 1993.

By Erin Huntimer

Inch by inch. Foot by foot. Year by year. Devils Lake swallows more land and livelihoods. It's a disaster in slow motion, 18 years in the making. On the surface, it seems to lack the rush-and-run of a sudden crisis, yet this flood is no less devastating or costly.

The lake started rising in 1993, and since then has risen 31 feet and quadrupled in size. Devils Lake now covers 209,000 acres, up from 44,230 acres in 1993. Hidden in each water-covered acre is a story: A family is forced from its home. A farmer loses his crops. A business moves after losing infrastructure to the water.

Northern Plains Electric Cooperative of Cando and Carrington, ND, is losing ground – and members – to the lake. The cooperative's policy on the flooded service territory: "Provide service where possible." Persistent linemen, engineers and operations personnel do all they can for as long as they can to safely serve members, but for many the day comes where it's just not possible anymore.

"We have limits in what our linemen can get to and repair with the roads being impassible," says Jay Jacobson, Northern Plains manager. "We're resigned to the fact that our lines are in fields that are all of a sudden converted to lakes, and we can't get out to the line to repair poles when they do go down."

The Northern Plains board and management must then make that final decision to discontinue service. "It's a difficult situation – difficult for us, difficult for the consumers. In a lot of cases, it's the last step before they can't live at that location anymore," Jacobson says.

"These are folks who have fought rising water for years, and watched the lake incrementally come up. And that last step, though it seems inevitable, is always painful and difficult for the farmer and homeowner. And we understand that because it's painful and difficult for us."

Continued ▶

Following the flood

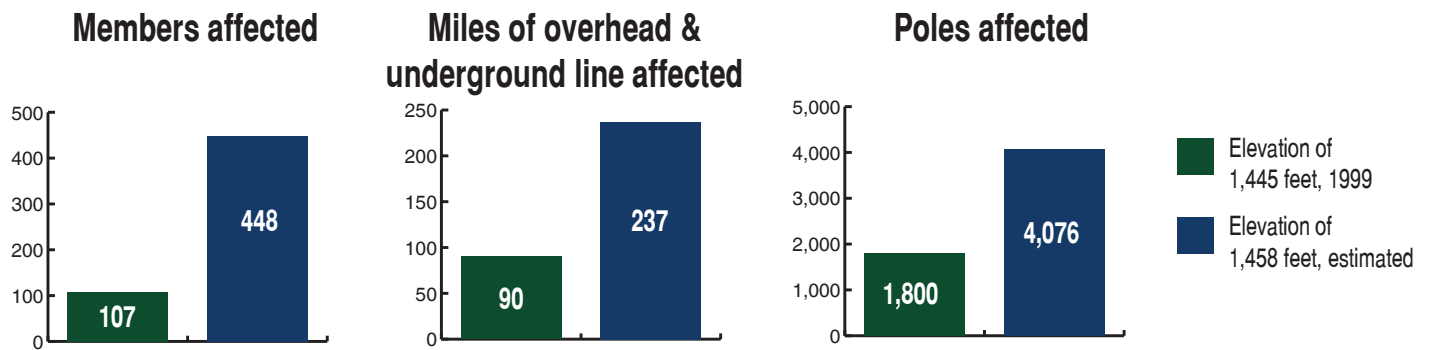


Connie Krapp, director of communications and public relations for Northern Plains, has written stories nearly

every year since the flood became overwhelming, around 1998. "I always find it highly emotional – interviewing farmers who can't do a thing but watch their property go under," she says. "I find it unbelievable there's no help from the feds for farmers who lose their land."

She says even when landowners keep their taxes paid on their flooded property, they lose governance of it when the waters reach 6 feet in depth. "Then it is officially considered 'navigable water,' and therefore governed federally."

Northern Plains has documented such struggles, including a three-part series published in their Northern Notes magazine and blog. Read the series and more at <http://blog.nplains.com>.



Should Devils Lake reach an elevation of 1,458 feet, the impacts to Northern Plains and its members will be dramatic. This landmark elevation is the point at which the lake spills into a natural outlet, the Tolna Coulee.

As of September 2011, Devils Lake stood at an elevation of roughly 1,454 feet above mean sea level. At 1,458 feet, the lake will spill into a natural outlet, the Tolna Coulee. If the flow of water is uncontrolled, even more lives, property and cities along the Sheyenne and Red rivers will be devastated, only much more quickly. Solutions for a more controlled release through outlets are on the drawing boards or in the works, but nothing significant has been completed yet.

About 12 years ago when the lake was at an elevation of 1,445 feet, 107 member accounts, 90 miles of line and 1,800 poles were affected in Northern Plains’ service territory. While current estimates aren’t available, if the lake reaches 1,458 feet, an estimated 448 member accounts, 237 miles of overhead and underground line, and 4,076 poles will be affected.

Northern Plains is trying to stay ahead of the flood. Next year, the cooperative will build a new line along Highway 19 that connects the cities of Devils Lake and Minnewaukan. The current line that runs that route is entirely under water. Northern Plains will also be working with its power supplier, Central Power Electric Cooperative, to move a substation, which serves Northern Plains. The substation is dry at the moment, but only because farm roads are holding back the water.

Jacobson sees next year as key in the fight. “If we get another heavy snowfall and another wet spring, it’s going to be demoralizing, and it’s going to have a huge impact on another layer of our consumers. More roads are going to go under, and we’re going to have a more difficult time.”

In the face of it all, Jacobson holds onto a ray of hope, knowing that inevitably, things will change. The wet cycle will end. The water will go down. It’ll be time to rebuild. But in the meantime, the co-op focuses on the rising water.

“We’ve dedicated ourselves to, year by year, inch by inch, foot by foot, continue working with these problems. Sooner or later we’re going to get to the end of them. Then we’ll start another process – reconstructing the area after the water goes down.”

Learn more

Northern Plains requires roads that allow its crews access to member accounts. But too often, the roads in the region lead to nowhere. Learn more by watching the video produced by Northern Plains: <http://bit.ly/RoadsToNowhere>.

Devils Lake flood stats

- 2 – Times Devils Lake has reached its spill elevation of 1,458 feet in the last 4,000 years
- 2.5 – Feet Devils Lake has risen this year
- 3.5 – Feet Devils Lake has to rise before it spills down the Sheyenne
- 10,000-15,000 – Acres of land swallowed each time Devils Lake rises one foot
- 261,000 – Acres covered by Devils Lake at its spill elevation of 1,458 feet
- 1,100 – Jobs lost as a result of the Devils Lake flooding
- \$195 million – Annual economic loss caused by the flood
- \$1 billion – Cost of the flood to U.S. taxpayers

(Portions printed in the August 2011 issue of Northern Notes magazine.)