



STAFF PHOTO BY SPENSER BICKETT

Yves Gauthier of Berger Horticultural Products explains to the Koochiching County Board Tuesday why the Pine Island peat project hasn't been as productive as predicted.

COUNTY

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deposits are in designated Scientific and Natural Areas, which are off limits to development.

“We can't touch those, the only thing that goes there are mosquitoes and crazy people that do research,” Ecklund said.

County officials are frustrated with how things have progressed at the site due to the county's infrastructure investment there, Ecklund said. A road to the site has been constructed, power lines have been connected, and local contractors have purchased special equipment to develop the site that does not appear to be progressing toward harvest, he said.

Berger understands the frustration, Gauthier said, but a shrinking peat market and a declining economy led to decreased site use since the project began in 1998.

In 1998, the timing was good to start developing the peat site near Big Falls, Gauthier said. The company came up with a plan in 2001, but in 2003, circumstances changed, notably with fuel and the strength of the Canadian dollar. From 2003-2008 Berger didn't grow the site due to these issues, he said, but had to keep investing in the operation to keep it viable.

Berger started working more on the site in 2005-2006, Gauthier said, but this growth was impeded by the global recession in 2008. During this time, Berger pounced on an opportunity to develop a site in Manitoba, because it knew legislation would soon change and it would be more difficult to develop a site in the future.

“We cannot say no, because we know at that time the government would change legislation about the wetland, and that was the time to put our feet there,” Gauthier said.

This drew investment and focus toward the new site in Manitoba and away

from the Pine Island site, Gauthier said. Berger began again working at the site last year, and developed a strategic plan for the site. The peat market is shrinking, so Berger is focusing on increasing its market share and consolidating and keeping its current customers, he said.

One reason for the decreasing peat market is the declining sizes of backyards, Gauthier said. In addition, there is an increased interest in low-maintenance landscaping and decreased interest in gardening. Younger people also aren't gardening as much as older people, he said.

Berger's plan was to harvest sphagnum peat for gardening and horticultural use from the 840-acre Peat Island bog. At full production, the project would have provided \$2 million in net benefits annually, including five full-time, year-round jobs and 40 full-time seasonal jobs. Berger had been paying an annual state lease fee of \$6,000 to \$8,000 for the site.

Bringing in another company as a site partner wasn't part of the initial project plan, Gauthier said, but the current situation dictated a change.

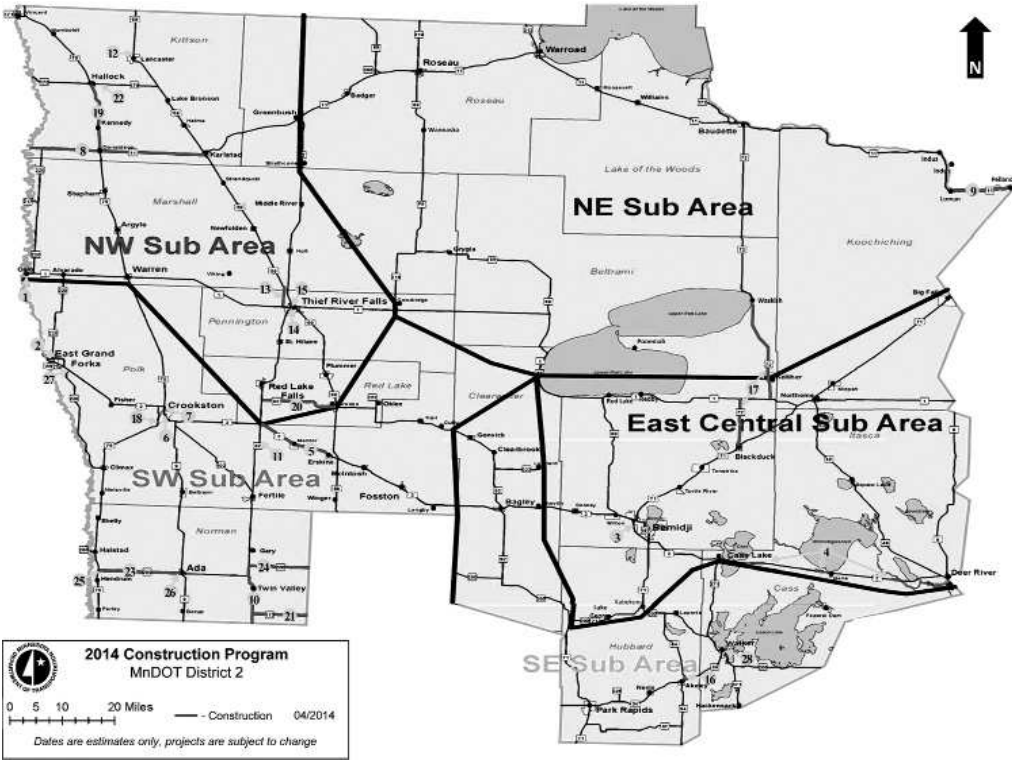
“We're conscious that we didn't do what we said, but on the other hand, we have a business decision to make,” Gauthier said.

If Berger can't come to an agreement with a partner by August, the lease for the site could be transferred back to the county, and the county could look to find a host for the site, Commissioner Wade Pavleck said.

The county gets frequent inquiries about the site from other companies, so it shouldn't be too difficult to find a new host is Berger can't make it work, Ecklund said.

“Frankly, we have a lot of peat in Koochiching County,” Ecklund said. “Most of it isn't accessible, but this one is, it's a valuable resource, and a lot of people know about it.”

2014 Construction



The Minnesota Department of Transportation kicked off its construction season with meetings around the state and the release of this map. Locally, the No. 9 project shows resurfacing of 11 miles of Highway 11 between Pelland to Loman. The project will also include the replacement of culverts and widening of shoulders. Total cost of the project is reported by MnDOT at \$6.64 million. It is expected to begin in July and be completed in the fall. Drivers should expect lane closures and short-term detours during the project, which is expected to provide a smoother and safer highway, according to the MnDOT release.

WEATHER

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slush to accumulate on the ice making it nearly impossible to plow, VNP Chief Ranger Chuck Remus said.

Remus said it's anybody's guess this year when the ice on area lakes will go out.

“Going into March, it's not showing any signs of melting and normally around this time it's pulling back from the rocks and shoreline,” he said. “It appears to be locked up tight.”

The late open water delays many plans at the park, he said.

“It's a big problem for our resource management-related projects that should start as soon as the ice is off, many have to do with lake level studies,” he said.

He said rock markers should be placed on the lakes prior to the May 10 walleye season opener and late ice could delay placement this year, he said.

Park trails continue to be groomed, but this week may be the last of that, he said. Travel on the marked trails is pretty good, he said, but he urged people to watch the temperatures because conditions could change fast allowing snow machines to break through the crust into slush causing their drivers trouble.

“Once it gets warm, that moisture will be a mess,” he said.

He recalled a couple years ago when March brought daytime temperatures in the 80s and nighttime temperatures in the 60s.

“Now, I just want to see it warm enough to take a walk after work and not freeze,” he said.

Larry Petersen, DNR area wildlife manager in International Falls, reports the winter severity index to The Journal each week.

Petersen said the the spring may be bringing out animals like skunk and racoons, which aren't

true hibernators. “They come out when the weather is warming up and kind of bumle around looking for food, which may not be available now,” he said.

The snow depth could be an issue for these animals, including bear, to find food. One of the first food sources in spring for bear is green vegetation, which doesn't appear likely soon.

Species like skunk and coon may turn to the easy sources they seek in the summer, such as dog food and garbage left outside. “That will be where they are often seen now, and along roadways,” he said.

The deep snow can be an advantage and disadvantage for wild animals at this time of year, he said. Snowshoe hare can reach branches they may not otherwise be able to access with less snow, and ruffed and sharptail grouse find security burrowing into the snow.

But deer, with their narrow feet and larger bodies, may have difficulty traveling through the deep snow looking for food. The deep snow can be a mixed bag for wolves, he said. Breaking through the deep snow in search of food take a lot of energy, but the next day a thick strong crust can form with a little sun and allow them to walk atop the snow without breaking through.

Freezing lines
Don Billig, chairman of the East Koochiching Sanitary Sewer District, said more than 15 residences have experienced frozen sewer line issues in the last month. He said many communities across northern Minnesota have been experiencing freezing water and sewer lines.

“It's been one of the coldest winters we've had, and the frost is going way deep,” he said.

While there's not much to be done to solve the problem until the winter is over, he said some are able to be steamed open with a

steamline.

For those that cannot be opened, a station near each residence that holds 100 gallons of sewage is being pumped regularly to keep the residences operational and sewer not backing up.

“That's the way the system is designed,” he said. “In our biggest area, each residence has a grinder station that collects all the sewage from the residence and holds it to a point where the pump comes and then it's pumping into a line.”

While some of the freezing has happened when people have been away from their homes for a period, or a neighbor has been away, others may be occurring because the line goes below a driveway which has been plowed exposing the area to the cold.

“The frost is deep and strong,” he said, and most lines have been drilled eight-feet deep.

A meeting of the district board with the system's engineering firm next week will focus on how to make revisions for the next phase of the system that will extend sewer to Dove Island “so this won't happen, hopefully, in that system,” he said.

The board would be considering what it can do to the existing system to alleviate the freezing problem in future years, he said. Those options include installing more clean outs so steam lines can more easily be used and possibly installing heat tape during the summer in an effort to keep the lines operating in future severe winters.

Normally each winter brings one or two frozen lines, he said.

“This has been the worst year we've had since they put in what's called the Jackfish project, and that's been in there for five to six years,” he said. “This year is terrible. And we're not the only ones, it's all over northern Minnesota.”

More winter?
Many likely consider it good news Borderland appears to have dodged a wintery mix predicted to hit late Wednesday night and last throughout the day Thursday.

Kevin Kraujalis, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Duluth, said the storm system stayed further south than anticipated and left only about an inch or less of the white stuff on the ground in Borderland.

“International Falls probably isn't going to see much,” he said Thursday.

Still, the month of March hasn't stayed as quiet.

So far, 15 inches of snow has fallen during the month – 10.4 inches of that fell a week ago Friday – which is above the normal snowfall of 7.6 inches for the month.

Last Friday's snowstorm helped make this month the 10th snowiest March on record as of Thursday, the meteorologist said.

He added Friday's snow broke a daily record for March 21. The previous record was set in 1949 when 2.8 inches of snow fell on that date.

Don't forget about the cold, either.

While the weekend temperatures will rebound to monthly averages, as of Thursday, this March is the second coldest on record, Kraujalis said. That stat ties in with this year ranking No. 1 as the coldest start to a calendar year at International Falls.

The National Weather Service said from Jan. 1 to March 23, the average temperature was 1.9 degrees. The old record of 2.1 degrees was set in 1979.

“It's been below average,” Kraujalis said.

Looking ahead into April, there are no signs of an immediate leap into spring. In fact, the meteorologist said Borderland can expect above average precipitation and below-normal temps.

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