

IS YOUR SURFACE WATER SYSTEM PREPARED TO ALLOW PUBLIC ACCESS?

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Many surface water systems throughout New York State have opened their area to the public and allowed some types of recreation.

There are a few things that you as an operator should consider when faced with this decision.

In the past, NYS DEC has approached municipalities with surface water systems requesting them to enter into contracts for public fishing access sites to be added to their properties. They offer to work with the landowner to determine a suitable parking area and build the lot for them. These contracts usually range from 10 to 20 years. If the system owner cancels the contract early, they are responsible for the construction costs to the State.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to opening your area to the public. The extra eyes can help in some situations. Many times, people will notify the operators of criminal behavior, water quality changes such as algae blooms, and even wildlife issues such as beavers. Having public access also allows conservation clubs to do trash pick-up around the area. They also can report invasive species.

As an operator, your focus is on public health, security, and operating within a specific budget. With this proposal, you will have to ask yourself or your board some questions.

Do you have room for a parking area that is away from the source and the treatment building for security reasons? Do you have enough staff to handle issuing permits and permit enforcement? Will this be a carry in/carry out area or will you be emptying trash cans regularly? Will it have 24hr access and will you allow boating? Will it offer year-round access and ice fishing?

24hr access brings its own problems. There may be neighbors nearby who object to the location. Late night parties can be a problem along with illegal activities because of the isolated location of most reservoirs. DEC Police are spread thin in NY State and may not be available to enforce their parking lot rules. Consider asking for a lockable gate and only be open during working hours.

You will need more signs than what DEC is willing to provide. You will want a sign stating the rules, signs for hours of use, and tow away signs so you do not have to track down vehicle owners when you should be going home. These come at a cost and municipalities may not be permitted by law to charge for permits to offset them.

Boating brings a few issues to mind. Launching boats by vehicles with leaking fluids, invasive species on boat bottoms, and accidents on the water can be a problem.

Ice fishing may not be permitted because of restrictions on the watershed rules and regulations. Some reservoirs have rapidly changing water levels making for unsafe ice. ATV's and snowmobiles may appear and start dragging fishing sheds out there. Think about

how you would handle a machine full of gasoline in your drinking water source.

Trash will be a problem. Whether it's carry in/carry out or cans provided, you will be picking up everything from worm containers to cans and bottles. I have seen clothing, fishing poles, fishing line, and gloves left behind. Fishing line will destroy mower belts and spindles.

As a former water superintendent and an avid fisherman, I love the fact that we have areas like this to enjoy, but I can also appreciate the work that is involved to keep these spots open. Always remember, water quality is your number one priority! 💧💧
