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Cabinet OK's Buffalo Lake stabilization

By **JIM LOZERON**
of The Advocate

STETTLER — A controversial plan to raise the level of nearby Buffalo Lake has been approved by the provincial cabinet.

The \$13.1-million water project in Premier Don Getty's Stettler riding had been considered for at least 20 years before getting the official go-ahead.

Environment Minister Ralph Klein said Friday construction and engineering work will begin some time this year on the scheme to divert water from the Red Deer River through Parlby Creek to Buffalo Lake.

The project is designed to improve water supplies in Mirror and Alix, increase recreational benefits of Buffalo Lake and boost area agriculture.

The on-again, off-again project, rejected several times as too costly and environmentally damaging, is still undergoing a federal environmental assessment.

But Jeff Stein, head of the resource impact section of the Fisheries and Oceans Department, said the review by three federal agencies won't likely affect the Getty government's decision to stabilize the lake.

"It is no different than the Oldman River dam," Mr. Stein said in an inter-

view from Winnipeg. "The fact that we had to conduct a review of the dam didn't stop construction."

By law, all projects which could potentially affect fish habitat must be screened by the federal government.

Mr. Stein said the federal report assessing the effect of the project on water quality, waterfowl and the fish habitat should be released in two weeks.

In approving the scheme, the cabinet agreed with the findings of a public review panel headed by former Lacombe mayor Don Thorne.

The panel said the project will im-

prove drinking water in nearby villages, but will have a minor negative effect on waterfowl and birds.

Mr. Klein announced the cabinet decision in a prepared statement. He was attending the Calgary Stampede and was unavailable for further comment.

Opposition politicians, noting that Premier Getty's home is located on the south shore of the lake, said the decision smacks of pork-barrel politicking.

But in the Buffalo Lake area, supporters of the project welcomed the news that the plan, shelved in 1984, was going ahead.

"I believe in the future people will be thankful that the province has acted to save the lake and the resource will be available for future generations," resort owner Jean MacDonald said.

New Democratic critic John McInnis recalled that the project was revived just weeks after Mr. Getty won the 1989 Stettler byelection.

"I think it is a phenomenal abuse of the premier's power," he said.

Grant Mitchell, Liberal environmental critic, called the decision base politics and said he is not convinced the project won't kill fish in the lake.

"Premier Getty is using taxpayers' money as if it were his own," he said.