

Are we being buffaloed so Getty can be Santa?



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Buffalo Lake apparently irritates the people who use it because the water level goes up and down.

In recent times it has been down. I'm told the smell is strong and boats scrape on rocks.

Too bad.

Why should the rest of the province cough up \$14 million or \$15 million to stabilize the lake level for a few hundred cottage owners, and maybe owners of shoreline property that's ripe for development?

That's the question that theoretically gets asked when the provincial cabinet sets spending priorities.

It won't be asked this time. Premier Don Getty's Stettler constituency includes the east side of Buffalo Lake, where all the cottages are located. He likes the project.

We're dealing with political influence.

Buffalo Lake isn't unique. The province already regulates the levels of about 20 other lakes. Most are regulated with weirs but two have water pumped into them.

Part of the stabilization work has already been done. Any water pumped from the Red Deer River into Buffalo Lake will flow through Parlbry Creek.

Two-thirds of the creek has been cleared and straightened over the past few years, for reasons that have nothing to do with Getty.

Ron Moore, the Conservative

MLA for the neighboring constituency of Lacombe, says the creek work has been one of his top priorities for the last seven years.

"Its initial benefit would be to farmers because it controls the flooding of hundreds of acres of hayland," Moore says.

Even if the project extends to Buffalo Lake, there's more involved than just fixing the lake level.

"The name Buffalo Lake stabilization is a little misleading," Moore says, "because it addresses the whole water level in that whole Parlbry basin."

Pumping extra water down Parlbry Creek would solve the worsening water supply problems of the communities of Alix and Mirror in Moore's constituency.

"There's all these problems that the stabilization of Buffalo Lake addresses," Moore says.

Moore has obviously been chipping away at this for years. Lake users have complained since 1978. But the Environment Department's report on water quality at the lake talks about "renewed interest" in the project as the reason for its latest study. A reasonable person assumes the "renewed interest" came from Getty. (The department is not clear on this matter.)

The first studies said fixing the water level would cause unacceptable algae growth. Is a message from Getty's office powerful enough to bend the results?

One hopes not. It is clear, however, that the new report requires careful reading.

Sampling of river water has been less frequent in recent years; the report acknowledges some high concentrations of phosphorus could have been missed as a result. Some conclusions are based on assumptions. There's a bald admission that the algae effects are difficult to predict.

The scientific side will presumably be sorted out in the environmental assessment, as will the effects on the abundant waterfowl.

As for whether the result looks and smells good, the province has some experience with this kind of project.

Gull Lake has been topped up with water pumped in from the Blindman River since the mid-1970s.

The stabilization has not been perfect, according to Gull Lake Mayor Ken Fargey. Water levels still fluctuate. There are more weeds and algae than before. Tourism has not shot up. On the other hand: "If we hadn't tried to stabilize we may not have had a lake."

Fair enough. Like Moore says, there are too many people around for a pure environment and there's got to be compromise.

Still, it seems like a good bet that one factor in this compromise is Don Getty's Santa Claus concept of politics. Want something expensive? Uncle Don will get it for you.

But does he ask any other questions along the way?

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