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Endangered bird may affect project

By MICHAEL LAU
of The Advocate

An endangered bird is being used in an attempt to derail a $13.1-million plan to stabilize water at Buffalo Lake.

The Red Deer River Naturalists Society has filed an objection to the scheme, aimed at increasing the lake's recreational benefits, improving water supplies in Mirror and Alix, and boosting agriculture.

Board member Michael O'Brien said the lake is a popular habitat for ducks, geese and the piping plover, an endangered species.

Plants around the lake are an important food source for the waterfowl, said Mr. O'Brien, of Red Deer.

"Many of these plants depend on a fluctuating water level. If the level is stabilized, this attractive habitat won't survive over the long term."

He said the economic benefits of the project are minimal except to engineering firms.

"The environmental damage to many species and in particular, the rare and endangered piping plover, is a very poor trade-off."

Environmentalist Martha Kostuch questioned the project's merits, saying it makes no economic sense.

"The project would alter, disrupt or destroy fisheries habitat," said the Rocky Mountain House veterinarian, also protesting the plan.

"Most importantly, there is the negative impact on shore birds, and in particular, the endangered piping plover."

The provincial government is asking opponents of the project to make their views known in writing.

Statements can be filed with the Controller of Water Resources, Alberta Environment, 2nd Floor, Oxbridge Place, 9820-106 St., Edmonton, T5K 2J6.

Monday is the deadline.

The piping plover, a small shoreline bird that feeds on micro-organisms at water's edge, has been a threatened species since 1978. It was listed as endangered in 1985.

However biologists from Canadian Wildlife Services and Alberta Fish and Wildlife say water stabilization could raise the number of piping plovers.

The scientists say plovers don't use Buffalo Lake. They nest instead on two adjacent lakes which could benefit from the project.