

Water diversion plan revived

Scheme to add water to lake would benefit Getty's riding

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The Alberta government resuracted a \$15-million water diversion project to benefit Premier Don Getty's Stettler riding just months after the premier's byelection win.

Getty's planned new home overlooks Buffalo Lake, which Alberta Environment said two years ago would be hurt, not helped, by the diversion.

Fluctuating water levels in the shallow lake have interfered with boating, fishing and swimming. Owners of the approximately 368 cabins on the lake have complained since 1978 that the waters needed topping up.

Contradicting earlier studies, an Alberta Environment report released Monday says diverting water from the Red Deer River into

Buffalo Lake will not harm the environment.

Government studies in 1982, 1984 and again in 1987 said the diversion would clog the lake with unacceptably high levels of algae. Recreation would be hurt and not helped. The project was mothballed in 1984.

The study released Monday was commissioned in early July, Environment spokesman Diane Dickinson said Tuesday.

Liberal environment critic Grant Mitchell, noting that Getty won the byelection in May, questioned the report's timing.

"Opening the issue for reconsideration, and the conclusions which contradict previous conclusions, raise questions about the objectivity of the study," he said.

Mitchell said the proposed \$15-million expenditure to improve recreation on one Alberta lake is not justified. "Fifteen million dol-

lars can be better spent on a variety of initiatives."

New Democrat leader Ray Martin said Tuesday the only thing that has changed since the diversion was rejected in 1984 is that Stettler has a new MLA.

"The timing, at least, is very suspect because this thing has been going on for at least 10 years," Martin said.

"I think the whole thing, frankly, stinks — and I'm not talking about algae."

The report says the Red Deer River will not pump as much algae-promoting phosphorous into the lake as predicted. The report is based on examination of water data from 1984 to 1987. Dickinson said the data had not been considered in previous studies.

While algae growth will increase, "whether this increase impairs the recreational use of Buffalo Lake depends to a large

degree on public perception of acceptable (algae) levels," the report says.

Hugh Dunne, Getty's press secretary, said Monday it is a "coincidence" that the premier's planned Stettler home overlooks the lake.

"The report is welcome news for residents of the Stettler constituency," a press release quotes Getty as stating.

Environment Minister Ralph Klein was not available for comment. Spokesman Rod Love said the province will start a full Environmental Impact Assessment immediately and it should be complete by next spring.

The province first started looking at the diversion in 1978. Buffalo Lake is 19 km northwest of Stettler. The \$15-million estimate of the diversion will be updated with engineering studies scheduled to begin next spring.