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Lake level increase gets study

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The Alberta government wants a study and an independent panel to review the environmental impact of raising the level of a lake near Premier Don Getty's new Stetler home.

Environment Minister Ralph Klein announced Tuesday a Calgary firm has been asked to prepare an environmental impact assessment on raising Buffalo Lake's water level. An independent panel will also be appointed to review the assessment.

However, critics for the main opposition parties chuckled at the announcement, calling it a clumsy attempt to give the controversial project credibility.

"The objective of this project is to provide an independent, scientifically credible assessment of the environment impacts associated (with the project)," Klein said in a news release.

Buffalo Lake is just north of Rochon Sands, near where Getty plans to build his new home. The house overlooks the lake, which has been described by local residents as a slough.

The decision to increase the water level caused a stir recently because the approval came only months after Getty won the Stettler election. Raising the lake's level has been an issue in the area at least since the early 1970s.

Liberal environment critic Grant Mitchell said Klein's move is a cynical manoeuvre to give the project needed credibility.

"It certainly is positive that the minister would undertake that in the case of Buffalo, but how could he not do the same with Alberta Energy Company and Daishowa?" Mitchell asked, referring to two proposed major pulp projects in northern Alberta.

"At best, it's an attempt to spend \$15 million to fill the premier's lake."

New Democrat critic John McInnis called the announcement a "clumsy way to whip up support in the area for the idea," and said the environment department's credibility is on the line.

He noted that earlier environmental studies found increasing the lake's level could also cause a problem by increasing algae.

"This was not a good idea until Mr. Getty won an election last May," said McInnis.

Three studies by the environment department this decade said the plan would clog the lake with algae. But the department recently concluded the problem won't be as bad as first predicted.

The lake's level will be raised with water diverted from the Red Deer River.