

Something's fishy about Buffalo Lake diversion

□ Klein will have to wear the horns if environment suffers

EDMONTON

Buffalo Lake will rise, and we will never smell fishier timing if they stock the thing with ripe sardines.

The news conference to announce approval of the water diversion near Premier Don Getty's land was held at the most dubious time possible.

It happened at 3 p.m. Tuesday, several blocks from the legislature, in the middle of Question Period on the final day of the session, with the premier

OPINION

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working extremely hard in Paris, France.

Today there will be no forum for opposition leaders to ask questions, and the premier is hardly likely to be distracted from his heavy schedule of exceptionally important meetings.

Did we mention that he is in Paris, France?

Don Thorne, the former Lacombe mayor who chaired the review panel, said during the Buffalo Lake hearings that the report would be ready no later than June 17. It arrived June 25, just as the session petered out.

Whatever the reasons for the delay, doubt wasn't among them. The three-member panel decided unequivocally that the project should go ahead. They listed 43 previous studies of the idea, but were undeterred by the doubts expressed in any of them.

Thorne allowed that "there will be a positive impact on economic development, lakewise."

There will also be an undeniable benefit for Getty's fortunes in Stettler, electionwise.

The project is extremely popular in the area. The hearings were amazing for their enthusiasm and lack of opposition.

At one point, after environment department officials gave an upbeat appraisal, Thorne urged the crowd to reward them with a round of applause, and the locals obliged.

The panel certainly reflected the feelings of local residents, and for that reason the approval is probably justified.

It would hardly be fair if province-wide suspicions about politics killed a project most people in the area want.

It should be clear, too, that this water diversion is far from an ecological disaster.

There have been mixed opinions about this for years, but Ralph Klein's people now say it's reasonable. If anything goes wrong, Klein will have to answer for the mistake.

It's probably true, too, that if the project happened in any other riding it would probably get very little public attention.

But there's now a fixed public impression that this project is going ahead because Getty wanted it. And he will benefit as much as other area landholders from any increase in property values, as Thorne conceded Tuesday.

In law, there's nothing whatever wrong with this.

Politically, it's as foolish as Tuesday's fishy timing.