

# ROUGH WATERS

## Tory plans to raise Buffalo Lake face opposition

By VICKI BARNETT  
Calgary Herald, STETTLER

**I**t seemed simple enough at first: Don Getty wanted to give a prairie lake new life.

Alberta's premier and the newly elected MLA for Stettler, Getty had the ear of locals who wanted to permanently raise Buffalo Lake's high-water mark and turn a shallow land-locked body of water into a recreational haven.

But Getty and his government also got an earful from environmentalists who wanted the lake left alone, and for nature to take its course with what they consider an extremely rich prairie ecosystem.

That debate continues to percolate over the economic and environmental merits of the project — dividing neighbors and on a larger scale pitting the local community against what they consider the unwarranted, unwelcome scrutiny of outsiders.

"It's spite," says local resident Jean MacDonald, who describes the lake as all but dead. "It irritates me when somebody outside the area can create such a stir, when most people in the area are so in favor of it."

**DRIVING THROUGH** the thick aspen forest surrounding the campsites, cabins and motel of her lakeside resort, called Ol' MacDonald's Campsite, MacDonald envisions a reasonably



SHANNON OATWAY, Calgary Herald

**LOCAL SUPPORTER:** Resort owner Jean MacDonald walks along the shore of 'all but dead' Buffalo Lake

less than \$12 million — the vast majority of it accruing to local land and cottage owners. Those benefits will be: cottage development (\$9.6 million), camping and day-use (\$412,000) and the villages of Alix and Mirror (\$1.6 million).

That's outrageous, says New Democrat environment critic John McInnis, noting the beneficiaries will be almost exclusively area landowners but the bill will be paid almost exclusively by taxpayers.

"That's \$6 for every man, woman and child in the province," McInnis argues.

The capital cost is being taken out of Alberta Environment's operating budget. McInnis suggests that's being done because if it came forward in the legislature as a capital expenditure, "we would be able to debate it."

Annual operating and maintenance costs, also to be paid for by provincial taxpayers, will total approximately \$250,000.

As the project has been pushed ahead, several stories and theories have swirled about the real reasons behind raising Buffalo Lake:

■ **REAL ESTATE:** Though it is reasonable to assume lakefront property values will rise with the water, MacDonald notes not one of her lots for sale has moved since the stabilization was approved.

■ **HIDDEN GOLFING AGENDA:** Is golf nut Getty planning to ultimately build a course on his lakeview land?



near forest surrounding the campfires, cabins and motel of her lakeside resort, called Ol' MacDonald's Campsite, MacDonald envisions a reasonably priced destination for recession-wracked Albertans — particularly Calgarians.

And Buffalo Lake has its attraction. A large, moderately saline lake 20 kilometres northwest of Stettler, it is surrounded by lush rolling hills, ponds, aspen woodlands, farmland, some sandy beaches and 784 developed and undeveloped cottage lots. The area supports wildlife such as northern pike, coyote, beaver, muskrats, deer and numerous kinds of birds.

Buffalo Lake's water comes via precipitation, groundwater and a creek — but in recent years, evaporation has removed more from the lake than has flowed in.

That slow decline in water levels distresses cottage owners, local farmers and campers. They took those worries to their new MLA Getty, who in 1990 built a large ranch-style home with an impressive view of the lake just two kilometres away.

The idea of stabilizing the lake's level with water diverted from the Red Deer River was first raised in 1908 and talked about through the following decades. Alberta Environment produced a study in 1982 that concluded while it was technically possible, it would cause increased algae growth. Two more department studies, in 1984 and 1987, reached the same conclusions.

Four months after Getty won the Stettler byelection, another provincial study was launched — concluding new conditions might eliminate the risk of algae growth.

Following public hearings on possible environmental impacts, the project was approved a year ago.

Lake stabilization would permit boating, benefit cottage owners, improve water quality and supply in

**LOCAL SUPPORTER:** Resort owner Jean MacDonald walks along the shore of 'all but dead' Buffalo Lake

nearby Mirror and Alix, and diversify the local oil-and-agriculture based economy in the area through tourism.

A Buffalo Lake management team has tentative plans to begin the diversion work — using a pipeline and Parly Creek — by 1995, taking about three years to slowly raise the shoreline.

For management team chairman Angus Braseth, the issue is simple: "Without the project, Buffalo Lake would become stagnant because man has changed the environment through roads, highways and cultivation — interfering with nature's way of stabilizing the lake."

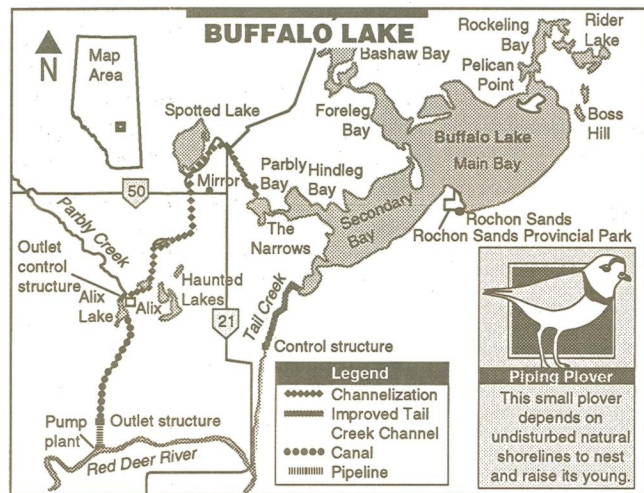
**ENVIRONMENTALISTS**, people mostly from outside the area, say there are strong arguments against the project.

Several concerns are repeatedly raised about the project's possible impacts on:

■ **PRAIRIE PIPING PLOVERS:** It's feared the habitat of these plump, bow-legged shorebirds — declining in numbers throughout western North America — would be lost. J. Paul Goossen, chairman of the prairie piping plover recovery team (part of an international effort to save the species) says the birds' sand and gravel nesting areas on Rockeling Bay and Rider Lake would need to be saved, perhaps through a control structure and pump-and-treat device. Even then, there are worries the project would affect the birds' insect food base and nesting areas.

■ **MIGRATORY BIRDS:** The lake area is considered internationally significant habitat. It's also home to 14 types of waterfowl and falls under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, a continental program to boost waterfowl populations.

■ **WATER QUALITY:** Along with



JANICE HINKS, Calgary Herald

the concerns about increased algae growth, there are worries water from the Red Deer River will also carry unusually high levels of mercury and other contaminants. Dr. Niels Damgaard, a Calgarian and president of the Alberta Fish and Game Association, reasons: "You'll change the water quality, then the plants, waterfowl and fisheries."

■ **PLANTS:** An environmental impact assessment released in 1991 by Environmental Management Associates of Calgary noted three rare plant species and eight uncommon ones in the area, and "some loss of these rare plants may occur as a result of inundation of the current shoreline."

■ **SILT:** A byproduct of straightening Parly Creek to carry Red Deer River water into the lake could be increased siltation. "The vegetation along the side of the creek that reduced erosion has been stripped away... silt is washing into the lake, but none of the public goes there (to that part of the lake) so nobody notices," says Charles Bird, a naturalist and retired University of Calgary botanist living in the area.

**THERE'S A SECOND** debate about Buffalo Lake — over its economics.

Last year's EIA report indicated the current estimated project costs of more than \$13 million outweigh benefits of

tion was approved.  
■ **HIDDEN GOLFING AGENDA:** Is golf nut Getty planning to ultimately build a course on his lakeview land? MacDonald scoffs at that notion, particularly since there's at least one golf course already planned for Stettler.

■ **VOTER THANKS:** Is the project just another reward to Stettler for voting Getty back into the legislature? Stettler has already received an AADAC centre and the marketing offices of the Western Canada Lottery Corporation.

■ **PRIME TIME:** Is the lake stabilization plan part of a larger water diversion scheme to move water from northern Alberta to drier southern parts of the province? The Alberta government says it has abandoned the controversial PRIME scheme brought forward in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but prominent Alberta environmentalist Martha Kostuch says all water projects built in the last 20 years have fit into it.

As she has on several environmental issues in Alberta, Kostuch is in the thick of this fight. She was at the provincial impact hearings and is now pushing for a federal environmental impact assessment — skeptically calling the whole matter Getty's Boondoggle.

■ **A PLEASANT**, attractive lake with increased water levels is something Charles Bird says he can live with — as long as it's done properly.

But Bird also wants safeguards. "If it takes a few other studies along the way, let's do them."

MacDonald, though, says the time for studies has come and gone, noting local residents have been fighting for lake improvement for decades and more money has been expended studying the lake than it would cost to fix it.

"If we don't get any more rain than we have been getting, the lake won't last another 20 years."