

Lake Winnipeg Regulation

Clean Environment Commission Hearing

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**Fort Garry Hotel, Spa and Conference Centre
Concert Hall, 7th Floor**

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Members of the Commission, Fellow Presenters and Guests:

The shoreline of Lake Winnipeg is in ruin. Once pristine beaches are devastated. At least one bird species may be gone forever. Why? Because we have turned a natural lake and water system into a man-made cesspool.

The only way to end and reverse the destruction of the past 40 years and to begin the healing process is to reduce the regulation range by at least one foot or more.

I am not a biologist or an engineer or any other particular expert. My comments are based on my experience around Lake Winnipeg. It is the culmination of 50 years of observation. Call it traditional knowledge. My parents bought a cabin at Grand Beach in 1960. My formative summers were spent there. I built my own cottage on the other side of the lake at Sandy Hook in 1979. It would eventually become my permanent residence where my wife and I reside today. I began a 35-year career with Manitoba Parks in 1975 at Hecla. I again lived, worked and played along the shoreline of Lake Winnipeg. During that career, I became involved with the Piping Plover Recovery Program, eventually co-chairing it. I am currently its co-ordinator working for the Portage Natural History Group in conjunction with Manitoba Conservation. And last, I had the good fortune in 2012 to participate on a summer tour aboard the research ship Namao, owned and operated by the Lake Winnipeg Research Consortium, and saw and experienced the North Basin of Lake Winnipeg firsthand.

When the idea of Lake Winnipeg water regulation was first broached, the decision makers at the time were dealing with a more or less consistent climate pattern. And after regulation was put in place everything went according to plan especially during the 1980s when water levels and precipitation amounts were low. Does everyone remember the province seemingly on fire every summer during that decade? Do you remember the Labour Day fires in Nopiming Provincial Park in 1983? I believe those day-time highs are still all-time records. And then there was the devastating fire

at Wallace Lake in 1987. And the fires continued every summer until the end of the decade. People were wearing the t-shirts..."I survived the fire of"... Then – things – changed.

Since the early 1990s we have been in a high precipitation regime. Whether it is cyclical in nature or a product of climate change I am unable to say. However, that is the fact of the matter and because Manitoba Hydro has not reacted quickly enough or has been resistant to lowering lake levels to acceptable levels the Lake Winnipeg shoreline has been ruined. And don't get me wrong, I am not attacking Manitoba Hydro. They are well within their legal obligations. And as a consumer, I enjoy inexpensive electrical rates just like everyone else, maybe more so, as our home uses electric heat. But the fact remains, the shoreline is greatly changed from pre-regulation days and does not enjoy the benefits of a naturally fluctuating lake level. Have devastating floods been prevented as were seen in the 1950s? Perhaps. However, the accumulated costs of remediating shorelines and the loss of environmental goods and services have never truly been factored into the equation. If they were, they would surely be more costly than one-time minor flood events.

I had no better opportunity to see the destructive impact of high water levels than when I toured the Lake Winnipeg North Basin aboard the Namao in 2012. I was shocked to see the northern shoreline literally caving into the lake. Coniferous trees lined the shoreline like so many matchsticks in an ashtray. Surely the shoreline did not look like this before Lake Winnipeg regulation.

Let me try to paint you a word picture of what I have seen over the past 25 years. Try to picture Lake Winnipeg as a giant bathtub not unlike the one in your own homes, except bigger...gigantic. It has a drain with a stopper or plug, we'll call the Nelson River. What makes this bathtub different from yours is that it has three faucets to fill it. One at the opposite end of the drain we'll call the Red River. The other two faucets are on opposite sides of the bathtub. The one on the right side when facing the drain we'll call the Winnipeg River. The one on the left side when facing the drain we'll call the

Saskatchewan River. Now, imagine those faucets being opened at the same time. And here's the kicker, imagine that the tub is already almost full. Now, with the faucets open, you don't have to be a brain surgeon to know what happens next. The tub fills to nearly overflowing even with the drain open. If the water in your tub gets sloshed around by a couple of your kids what happens? You end up with a heck of a mess with water on the walls and floor. This happens to the Lake Winnipeg tub when storms and high winds occur.

And as an aside, wind set-up needs to be accounted for in the final determination of the next licence agreement. To not include the effects of wind on lake levels is a gross misrepresentation. To set levels that are wind-eliminated is pure poppycock. The wind is always blowing on that lake.

So, what's the point of this word picture. The fact is that when we artificially leave lake levels high, even if they are within the limits of the current Manitoba Hydro licence agreement, there is no where for this extra water to go and thus our shorelines and beaches are ruined as the water sloshes around the lake. No one expected or could have predicted the high precipitation levels that have occurred over the past 25 years. And so, no one built in a contingency for the extra water. To be able to accept the water from the three faucets being turned on at the same time, Lake Winnipeg's overall water level must be reduced. And now I can hear the uproar from the executives of Manitoba Hydro and our current government that this can't be done as it would not be economically feasible and Hydro rates would skyrocket. And I would counter that argument by saying that if Manitoba Hydro had to mitigate the true costs of the ruination of the lake's shoreline and beaches, the cost would be much higher than any lost revenue from reducing the lake level in their next licence.

I'd like to end my presentation with a few comments about the piping plover, a shorebird first placed on the endangered species list in 1985. This bird nests on the ground. It prefers wide, flat, sandy beaches, not unlike what you would see at Grand Beach. They occur in three separate

populations: the Great Plains, which includes our population, a small but increasing group around the Great Lakes and a third population residing up and down the Atlantic coast. In other words, any place with habitat consisting of WIDE, un-vegetated expanses of sand will have a breeding population. Their numbers have struggled due to a loss of habitat and what preferred habitat exists is exactly what we prefer for recreation. Thus, they need to dodge human activity as they attempt to nest and reproduce.

However, as precipitation levels have increased across Manitoba our big lakes like Winnipeg and Manitoba have filled to over capacity. The natural outcome of this situation is a reduction in preferred breeding habitat and so our population has plummeted. But, the outcome is not natural. The situation on Lake Winnipeg is that the contractual operating levels have eliminated low water periods that typically are conducive to providing optimal habitat for piping plovers to reproduce and this compensates for high water years. The population cannot withstand the high water period. Even at 711 the habitat is a third or half that, of what it was during low water years. The narrowness of the range allowed in the current licence does not allow for the sustainability of the piping plover. We already may be too late. The bird has not been seen anywhere in the province for the past two years. THAT is a sad statement. For piping plovers to have any chance of re-establishing on our Lake Winnipeg beaches, the regulation range must be lowered by at least a foot or more.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to make my recommendation to reduce the overall lake level and expand the range of high and low water periods within a new licence agreement. No doubt you will be bombarded with scientific papers and more statistical information than a professional sports franchise. I only ask that you not be fooled and that you give equal weight to the information you receive from those that have real experience with and on Lake Winnipeg. Only you have the ability, through your decisions, to begin to mend the injuries inflicted on this once great lake by inappropriate regulation.

Remember the bathtub. Thank you.