



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

July 5, 2012

Will the Province Protect the Little Saskatchewan River?

The beautiful Little Saskatchewan River (LSR), reconized as a unique habitat for endangered, at-risk and common species, winds its way through Keesekoowenin First Nation and the towns of Minnedosa, Rapid City and Rivers in southwest Manitoba. It empties into the Assiniboine River about 6 miles west of the City of Brandon's water supply intake, from its headwaters at Riding Mountain National Park. Three dams divide the river, providing recreational lakes, fisheries and drinking water. It supplies water for livestock, smaller irrigation projects, recreation and a repository for waste water from the Husky Ethanol Plant and three towns.

The Rivers dam defines the lower reach of the river - a popular rafting, canoeing and kayaking location for Brandon and area residents. Adjacent to Lake Wahtopanah's Class 2 fishery above the dam, is a provincial park and residential/cottage development.

The health of the river's aquatic and riparian ecosystems is under serious threat by a proposal from the Daly Irrigation Development Group (DIDG) to withdraw water to irrigate potatoes and cereal crops through 31 pivots. Their proposal is being reviewed under Manitoba's *Environment Act*. A license is expected to be issued in early July.

In dry years, the water flow through the Rivers dam is barely enough to ensure short-term fish survival. That's a problem 15 out of 36 years. The river's fragile ecosystem provides critical habitat for several endangered and at-risk species, yet the proponents and Manitoba Conservation's Environmental Licensing Branch believe

that there's enough public water to exploit for this private operation. Growing food doesn't have to harm the land and water.

Proponents say Rivers dam can be managed differently by supplementing low river flows to supply crops with water from the reservoir, by lowering lake levels. This would assist the project in achieving its stated purpose to "provide financial and agronomic risk management for the partnership group, while providing necessary food production."

Conservation's licensors seems to have rejected this idea which could compromise the lake's drinking water quality. Instead, it's maintained a way has been found to ensure enough flow is reserved to protect the ecosystem while giving the irrigators the amount of water at the extraction rate they want. Closer examination of a draft licensing clause reveals the real potential for something different to happen.

It proposes the irrigators maintain a minimum instream flow of 18.5 cubic feet per second (cfs), "or as determined by Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship and in accordance with the provisions of a Water Rights License Issued for the development."

At first glance the clause appears to be an immutable reservation of 18.5 cfs for riparian needs. It is not. The discretion for Conservation and Water Stewardship to lower the minimum required riparian flow is built into the license.

The upper limit of 21 cfs for licensing purposes, called the firm annual yield of the reservoir, is calculated from actual flows recorded in the driest years. Existing water licensees, including the Town of

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Rivers, have been allocated 7.7 cfs. During drought periods, water available for aquatic and riparian needs is expected to be 21 cfs minus 7.7 cfs, or 13.3 cfs. This flow is close to the bare minimum needed to maintain short-term fish survival. The DIDG wants to remove water at a rate of 19.6 cfs. If approved, the river's water will be over-allocated.

To address this problem, Conservation proposes to allow the irrigators to extract water only at times when they think "excess" water is flowing over the dam. Greatest demand for irrigation water occurs precisely during times of drought and, hence low river flow.

Because of interest in developing the LSR as a source of irrigation water, the province determined that an instream flow study was needed to understand if water extraction is possible while protecting the ecosystem. This study will take years to complete. Meanwhile, Conservation wants to accommodate the desires of the irrigator group now, with no firm scientific understanding of what further level of development, if any, the LSR could sustain.

Potato producers are under contract to supply companies with product. The foremost interest of these companies is to guarantee a firm supply and producers, to deliver this contracted supply. Agriculture industries of many types have consistently complained to the provincial government about economic hardship and losses when the province has attempted to impose or enforce measures to protect the environment. It is reasonable to assume that these irrigators will make political hay of any decision to deny them access to water when

they need it most. At the same time when the aquatic and riparian ecosystem also needs it most.

Gordon Mackintosh, Minister of Conservation and Water Stewardship, has the authority under the *Water Rights Act* to "refuse to issue a licence, if, in the opinion of the minister, the action authorized by the licence would negatively affect an aquatic ecosystem" and must consider the instream flows necessary to "ensure that aquatic ecosystems are protected and maintained." Without a completed and credible instream flow study, the departments have yet to develop the capacity to scientifically determine that giving water to the DIDG won't harm both human and natural life in and around the River-- even during periods of higher flow.

The government's stated commitment to the protection of water, aquatic ecosystems, rare and endangered species and their habitat, drinking water supplies, recreation and socio-economic benefits to communities that rivers provide and sustainable development in general, has no meaning if these irrigators are licensed to proceed **before** knowing what harm could befall the Little Saskatchewan River.

The condition precedent for any further "development" of this important river must be the completion of a credible instream flow study. To require one would clearly distinguish Manitoba's environment and sustainable development policy from that of the Harper Conservative government.

Ruth Pryzner operates an ecological family farm in the RM of Daly

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