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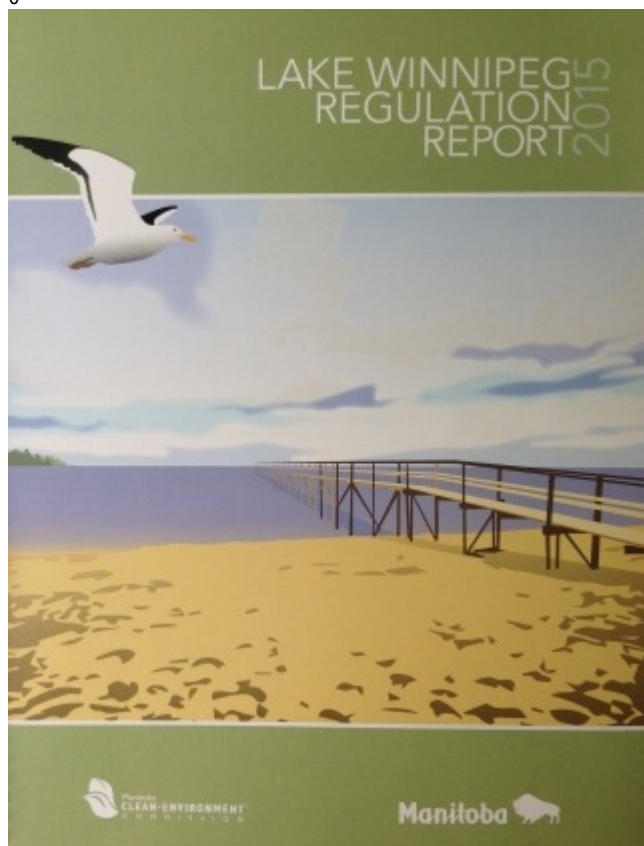
Clean Environment Commission report on Lake Winnipeg regulation

News

LWF

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On Oct. 19, the Manitoba government released the Clean Environment Commission's report on Lake Winnipeg regulation.

The CEC and its role

The [Manitoba Clean Environment Commission](#) (CEC) is an arms-length provincial agency established to provide advice and recommendations to the minister of conservation and water stewardship, and to develop and maintain public participation in environmental matters. Its recommendations are not binding; the minister reviews them and chooses whether to adopt them.

The scope of the recent report

The CEC was asked to conduct a review and gather public input on Manitoba Hydro's request for a final licence for Lake Winnipeg regulation.

Manitoba Hydro has been regulating the level of Lake Winnipeg since 1976 in order to provide a reliable supply of water for its Nelson River generating stations and to reduce the extent of flooding in communities around the lake. Lake level regulation involves only a portion of Manitoba Hydro's total infrastructure in the province, including the Jenpeg dam and a series of channels and control structures between Lake Winnipeg and Cross Lake. Until now, Manitoba Hydro has been operating this infrastructure to regulate lake levels under an interim licence.

A series of public hearings was held across Manitoba earlier this year, at which the commission heard from approximately 300 individuals in 20 communities. The CEC also received a number of written submissions.

The report's findings

The final report is over 200 pages and includes 34 separate recommendations on a variety of issues. Several recommendations fall outside the scope of the CEC's assigned mandate. In the document's foreword, commission chairman Terry Sargeant explained:

"While we were not asked to look at the state of Lake Winnipeg, we did hear much – in all communities – which we cannot ignore, about which we cannot help but have some opinions, and which we will share in this report. Although much of this is outside of our mandate, expectations may have been raised that the many and varied concerns we heard will be addressed." (P. xii)

With respect to Manitoba Hydro's regulation of the lake, the CEC concludes that regulation has reduced the extent of flooding on Lake Winnipeg itself that would have been experienced over the past two decades. However, the commission also acknowledged that regulation "has caused a variety of environmental and socio-economic concerns downstream of Lake Winnipeg and on the Nelson River." (P. xv/xvi)

Because of the limited scope of its assigned mandate, the CEC did not consider the impact of dams at Grand Rapids or along the Winnipeg River.

It is extremely important that downstream consequences of lake level regulation not be overlooked. Some of these consequences have been severe.

Notes the report:

"It was clear to the commission from the words of many presenters that impacts on culture and way of life have been profound and are still being felt." (P. 107)

How the CEC report relates to LWF's ongoing work on phosphorus reduction

Lake level regulation is just one piece in the large, complicated puzzle of Lake Winnipeg's health. Several recommendations within the CEC report link to our work to address phosphorus reduction and reinforce key LWF priorities. For example:

- **Wetlands are vital to the health of Lake Winnipeg**

The CEC both affirmed the many values of Manitoba's wetlands and acknowledged that wetlands across Canada continue to be threatened by a variety of activities. The commission concluded that much more needs to be known about Manitoba's wetlands. It recommended the provincial government conduct a comprehensive inventory of Lake Winnipeg wetlands and work to establish permanent protection for these vital habitats.

Wetland protection is one of the most important opportunities we have to protect Lake Winnipeg – that's why it's [Action 1](#) of our [Lake Winnipeg Health Plan](#). But protection is just the first step. We also need to invest in wetland restoration to increase our capacity to remove nutrients from our waterways.

- **We need to look upstream to address nutrient loading**

Excess nutrients in Lake Winnipeg result from what we are putting into the lake, not what's going out. The CEC concluded that algae-causing nutrient concentrations resulting from Lake Winnipeg regulation are insignificant in comparison to the changes resulting from increased nutrient inflows in the Red River and other rivers. To address harmful algae blooms, we need to look upstream and focus on actions taking place across the lake's vast watershed.

While Lake Winnipeg regulation does not directly impact eutrophication, it does have an important indirect effect: it impacts the health of coastal wetlands such as Netley-Libau Marsh because it contributes to high-water levels. Without periodic low water levels, a marsh's vegetation is unable to regenerate and its filtering capacity is reduced.

Restoration of Netley-Libau Marsh is a focus of [Action 5](#) of our [Lake Winnipeg Health Plan](#).

- **Coordinated action is needed**

The commission noted: "there is no specific set of management goals or policy objectives uniting all of these programs and planning and advisory bodies, with the exception of unspecified nutrient reduction targets." (P. 19)

Watersheds are natural boundaries, not political ones. Lake Winnipeg's watershed is huge, encompassing four Canadian provinces, four American states and multiple First Nations. Because the nutrients flowing into our lake originate from different jurisdictions, interprovincial and international collaboration is required.

We need big-picture leadership for Lake Winnipeg that coordinates all the stakeholders and initiatives underway. We also need concrete timelines and targets to ensure we are holding ourselves accountable.

Environmental challenges require commitment and perseverance. We need to stop talking about "fixing" Lake Winnipeg and make a long-term commitment to managing it. Using the [Lake Winnipeg Health Plan](#) as a road map, we are working with a growing network of partners to leverage the positive power of collaboration in order to have a meaningful impact throughout the watershed.

For those interested in reading more

The full CEC report is available [here](#).

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