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## Submission to Environment and Climate Change Canada: Towards the Creation of a Canada Water Agency

March 1, 2021

### Lake Winnipeg's health is a national priority

At the centre of Canada, Lake Winnipeg is the world's 10<sup>th</sup> largest freshwater lake, recognized nationally and internationally for its ecologically and culturally important habitats. While the lake is situated within the province of Manitoba, its watershed of nearly one million square kilometers draws water from four provinces, four states and hundreds of Indigenous nations.

Over the past century, peoples around Lake Winnipeg have witnessed a concerning decline in the lake's health. Eutrophication, shoreline erosion, wetland loss and flooding, biological invasions, contamination, species decline, and habitat degradation have culminated over decades, worsening as climate change adds further pressure to the system.

Improving the health of Lake Winnipeg is a well-established national priority, acknowledged through the policy priorities, mandate letters, and throne speeches of successive federal governments.

### *Towards the Creation of a Canada Water Agency*

With a thorough knowledge of the scientific, policy and public facets of the challenges facing Lake Winnipeg, the Lake Winnipeg Foundation highlights two specific concerns raised through our review of the discussion paper *Towards the Creation of a Canada Water Agency*, which must be addressed in any future water policy and practice at the federal level.

- 1) The discussion paper lacks any objective dedicated explicitly and exclusively to protection of freshwater quality and quantity.**

Fortunately, existing federal departments and agencies provide a foundation of regionally tailored programs, robust evidence and established laws and regulations for freshwater protection. These must be leveraged, focused and refined.

Within the Prairies region, the Lake Winnipeg Foundation submits the attached position paper, [\*Five Things the Federal Government Must Do for Lake Winnipeg\*](#), to inform ongoing federal efforts to protect our most precious resource.

Environment and Climate Change Canada must play a leadership role in strengthening protections for Lake Winnipeg by:

- Recognizing phosphorus as the cause of blue-green algal blooms on Lake Winnipeg;
- Using evidence to guarantee impact from every federal dollar spent to reduce phosphorus loading to Lake Winnipeg;
- Supporting Indigenous Peoples in reclaiming and restoring their relationship with water;
- Increasing enforcement of evidence-based policy and practices for freshwater health; and
- Fulfilling jurisdictional responsibilities through concrete action and strengthened accountability.

**2) The discussion paper falls short of effectively fulfilling the federal government’s commitment to affirm nation-to-nation relationships with Indigenous governments and to recognize and uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples.**

Water governance in Canada must explicitly acknowledge Indigenous jurisdiction and self-determination. In 1996, the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) made clear that Indigenous nations “are entitled to control matters important to their nations without intrusive interference. This authority is not something bestowed by other governments. It is inherent in their identity as peoples. But to be fully effective, their authority must be recognized by other governments.”

The establishment of a new Canada Water Agency provides a unique opportunity for Canada’s federal crown government to unambiguously recognize Indigenous authority and redress the severe deficit in government support provided to Indigenous systems of knowledge.

The Lake Winnipeg Foundation recommends that the new agency be established as an Indigenous-led agency, informed by Indigenous knowledge and law, and properly resourced to enable Indigenous knowledge holders to freely conduct ceremonies, generate and share knowledge across generations, and shape public policy processes.

## There are no shortcuts to healthy water

It is undeniable that freshwater management in Canada is inherently complex, unique across the diverse regions of our country, and further complicated by the urgent need to address climate change, improve collaboration, and advance reconciliation. There is no simple silver bullet that can easily address all the challenges we face. To succeed, the federal government must commit to the hard work involved in strengthening existing programs, making decisions based on data, and providing the resources necessary to ensure that legislation and regulation result in real changes on the ground.

To succeed on the path of reconciliation, the federal government must also recognize Indigenous authority and make space for Indigenous knowledge, law and governance to guide public policy and decision-making for water protection.

*The Lake Winnipeg Foundation (LWF) advocates for change and co-ordinates action to improve the health of Lake Winnipeg, now and for future generations. Combining the expertise of our Science Advisory Council and the commitment of our members, LWF is nationally recognized for our unique capacity to link science and action. Our goal is to ensure policy and practices informed by evidence are implemented and enforced.*

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