

ALGAE – A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH!

The recent snowfall around much of Saskatchewan has raised the Water Security Agency's (WSA) projections to a near normal to above normal snowmelt runoff across most of the province. If WSA had been enforcing its legislation and controlling illegal wetland drainage, the risk of flooding downstream and the amount of runoff would be a lot less.

For example, since 2016 WSA has said that they will be stopping illegal drainage into the Quill Lakes but the drains remain open, new drainage ditches continue to be dug, and wetlands continue to be drained, all sending more water to the Quill Lakes causing more flooding and increasing the risk of an outflow of saline water downstream to Last Mountain Lake and the Qu'Appelle - Assiniboine River.

We know that waters flowing through ditched agricultural land carry phosphates and nitrates which cause eutrophication and increase the number and intensity of algae blooms. High levels of algae reduce water clarity and can lead to decreases in available dissolved oxygen as the algae decays, conditions that can be very detrimental to game fish populations. High nitrate concentrations in waterways can be harmful to ecosystems and pose a risk to human health. As wetlands disappear, so does the natural filtration system that prevents contaminants from entering our lakes and rivers.

Researchers have shown that as drainage increases so does the amount of nutrients flowing downstream. Removal of wetlands removes our flood protection encouraging flash flooding overland. More frequent heavy rains combined with more spring runoff means more phosphates and nitrates are carried to our lakes and rivers. In the 2017 Federal budget Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Catherine McKenna, announced \$25.7 million in funding for the Lake Winnipeg Basin Program, which is part of the \$70.5-million funding allocated for freshwater protection. But one has to ask the question: How much of this good work will be undone by continued drainage in Saskatchewan?

We need only look to our provincial neighbours to ask the question: Why is this Saskatchewan moving backwards? Why are we destroying the very resource that may help get us through tough times in the future? Why are we polluting and flooding our waterways when we should be protecting them?

The Government of Alberta have developed a *Water for Life* 10 year action plan with goals to maintain healthy aquatic ecosystem; reliable quality water supplies and safe, secure drinking water. The Manitoba government has introduced a strategy to protect wetlands and increased fines for illegal drainage. Should we really be sending saline water from the Quill Lakes through the Qu'Appelle river system into Manitoba's waterways?

Why is the Saskatchewan Government not taking the same steps as our neighbouring provinces, steps to protect our resources, with a vision to look ahead with positive changes rather than stepping backwards and gambling with the future of our province and the legacy we should leave to our children.

SAWS continues to ask our Minister of Environment for their help in implementing a long term solution for the Quill Lake high water levels, which will benefit all stakeholders, including Manitoba, and ensure the safety of our water.

Agricultural drainage in the province of Saskatchewan is threatening our ecosystem and changing the natural landscape. Wetlands are disappearing and being replaced by straight-line farming practices. Our province is being stripped of a precious resource that is essential in combating extreme weather conditions such as excessive rainfall or drought. We often hear the refrain that farm production in this province must increase so that we can feed the world. There are ways to do this but it makes no sense to feed the world while we destroy ours.

For further information log on to our website at: <http://lmlsg.ca/saws/>

Sherry Forsyth Saskatchewan Alliance for Water Sustainability