

# **News Release/Media Invitation to Attend Press Conference**

**Monday June 5, 2023 at 2 pm**

Join us on Environment Day as the Saskatchewan Alliance for Water Sustainability (SAWS) along with the Calling Lakes Ecomuseum (CLEM) and Last Mountain Lake Stewardship Group (LMLSG) raises concerns over a new provincial wetland drainage policy.

**Monday June 5 @ 2 p.m. CST, in person at McKell Wascana Conservation Park, 12001, Wascana Cir, Regina, SK. We will meet on the bridge at McKell Park.**

**Interviews will be available following media event.**

The Saskatchewan Alliance for Water Sustainability is holding a Press Conference to raise concerns over a new agricultural water policy that will threaten our lakes and rivers with excess nutrients and increasing toxic algal blooms.

## **THE GOAL of the PRESS RELEASE**

Our goal is to bring awareness to the public and give them the opportunity to raise concerns and provide input to the Premier on how this policy will improve water quality. To increase awareness, we are also launching a letter-writing campaign for the citizens of Saskatchewan to Honorable Scott Moe, Premier of Saskatchewan, urging him to develop a wetland policy similar to Alberta and Manitoba first, followed by the agricultural water policy to ensure that ALL people in the province will benefit from sound water management.

## **WATER for a GROWING PROVINCE**

Water supplies are of much greater value—for all uses—if healthy water quality and ecosystem functions are maintained. Contamination of surface and ground waters, degradation of ecological health and function, and loss of biodiversity and wetlands, comes with real economic, social and environmental costs. These costs include health risks, loss of recreational opportunity, loss of habitats, reduced biodiversity, reduced water quality and supply, increased water treatment costs, and many others.

Failure to maintain the quality of our water supplies places additional stresses on Saskatchewan's ability to meet the demands for water and constrains population and economic growth. As well, groundwater aquifers are a valuable part of our supply that, contaminated or drained, can take centuries to recover.

Wetlands store water during floods, reduce damage from droughts, replenish well water for rural uses, aid livestock, and are critical to wild game and other species. They improve water quality by removing nutrients, sediment, pesticides, metals, and pathogens. Wetlands also store large amounts of carbon thus fighting climate change, while at the same time are important habitats supporting the maintenance of biodiversity.

Since 2013, the Saskatchewan Water Security Agency (WSA) has committed to developing a Saskatchewan Wetland Policy, and 10 years later there is still nothing. Instead, the Province is

developing a Wetland Drainage Policy (now Agricultural Water Stewardship Policy) which embeds all wetland management in a framework that focused mainly on farm profitability. For nearly a decade Saskatchewan Auditor has been critical of WSA, the agency responsible for protecting our wetlands and water supplies, citing that the Agency: has limited and ineffective policies around wetland retention and water quality. The Auditor also recommended that WSA needs to identify and bring unapproved high-risk drainage works into compliance, and that they develop a plan to address unapproved drainage in high or severe risk regions. A key example of this failure is the Quill Lakes area where flooding continues to consume tens of thousands of acres of valuable cropland and pasture and yet wetland drainage into the lakes continues unaddressed, unregulated, and uncontrolled.

Saskatchewan remains the only Province without a Wetland Conservation Policy.

### **WHY Are We CONCERNED**

SAWS is very concerned that proposed Policy prioritizes agricultural development over all other water uses, ignores treaty rights of First Nations, and creates a hierarchy in which economic development is paramount. There has been no mention of requirements to restore any drained wetlands; instead WSA states that they will maintain existing drainage and create new wetland drainage projects. Similarly, there is no explicit plan to improve water quality already damaged by wetland drainage and other inappropriate land uses, or restore previously-drained wetlands which recharge groundwater supplies, fight climate change, improve water quality, reduce impacts from flooding and drought, and sustain biodiversity. Finally, there has been limited recognition that wetland loss and agricultural intensification degrade the quality of remaining surface and ground waters. In contrast, 30 years of research by Dr. Peter Leavitt, Canada Research Chair in Environmental Change and Society at University of Regina, has shown that our lakes are getting sicker and levels of toxic algae blooms detrimental to human health are increasing due to agriculture, urbanization, and climate change. We are concerned that this new Policy will make things worse.

We are being told that water quality is a top of mind for this government, that under the Growth Plan protecting natural areas provides carbon sinks and wildlife habitat, and under the Prairie Resilience Climate Change Strategy that wetland habitat will be enhanced. But that is not what we're seeing. Instead, we see ongoing wetland drainage and have learned that WSA has licensed a drained area that is 17X the size of Regina in just the last few years, but did not require any wetlands to be restored or protected (WSA 2021-22 Annual Report). Our policies need to set Saskatchewan's economy, our farmers and ranchers, and our communities up for success by also protecting the environment.

Wascana Creek is a perfect example. The creek flowing through Regina to the Qu'Appelle is rated as unhealthy, and water quality is being made worse by licensed and illegal wetland drainage. The City of Regina's wastewater was once a major source of those pollutants but now it is not. With more wetland drainage planned, will this new drainage policy ensure that water quality is improved, or will it continue be made worse, causing more toxic algae blooms and undoing all the great work the City of Regina has done by upgrading its Wastewater Treatment Plant? We don't know and we think its a question we all should be asking.

We do know that:

- Wascana Creek is rated as unhealthy <https://wugwatr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Wascana-Riparian-Assessment-Interim-Report-2013-Final-edit.pdf>
- 76% of the phosphorus in Wascana Creek is from runoff, not waste treatment. <https://wugwatr.ca/wp-content/uploads/documents/QuAppelle-Basin-Land-Use-Water-Quality-UofS-study.pdf> pg 7
- The City of Regina was treating its waste water to reduce its impact on the creek but it was still a source of nutrients prior to the upgrades.
- The City of Regina stepped up and now the waste water discharged into Wascana Creek is cleaner than the water in the creek. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/u-of-regina-research-improve-polluted-streams-1.6253856>

Can we expect WSA to improve water quality with this new drainage policy? How can water quality be made better when WSA is telling us that this policy will keep all drainage and allow for more?

### **COMMUNITY LEADERS WHO ARE ALSO CONCERNED**

Dr Peter Leavitt, Fellow of Canada's national academy, the Royal Society of Canada, has several key concerns about the Agricultural Water Stewardship Policy, including:

1. Embedding wetland policy within an agricultural drainage framework;
2. Lack of explicit conservation and restoration measures;
3. Lack of meaningful enforcement;
4. Inadequate ability to separately manage runoff and permanent wetlands, and;
5. Made-in-Saskatchewan approach ignores decades of scientific evidence.

Dr Leavitt is quoted as saying, "Despite over a year of development, the written policy has never been presented for independent expert review. Based on WSA presentations, there is no meaningful protection of wetlands and no vision of how to improve water quality. Indigenous input is critical, but largely absent because of an inadequate consultation framework. While there are some potentially excellent measures to help farmers deal with occasional overland flooding, there is no other perspective meaningfully incorporated in the policy. Rather than roll out the policy as a 'done deal' in fall, WSA needs to present the actual wording to the public now and be prepared to modify the policy."

Dr Kerri Finlay, Co-Director of the Institute of Environmental Change and Society at the UofR is quoted as saying, "The current approach to develop an Agricultural Drainage Policy over a more comprehensive wetland policy is short-sighted and a missed opportunity. Addressing drainage on farmland deals with immediate threats to agriculture, but fails to address issues of long-term water quantity and quality, ecosystem services, and wildlife habitat. ALL individuals and groups across the province will benefit in the long-term if we have safe, accessible, reliable water resources, but this is only possible with a sound, science-based water management plan."

Saskatchewan is the only province in Canada that does not have a wetland policy. Since 2018, the Provincial Auditor has been critical of the Province of Saskatchewan's failure to establish an adequate wetland policy. Drainage and destruction of wetlands is an example of how nutrient rich water moves

from one farmer's field onto another and eventually into our prairie rivers, lakes and groundwater. This causes the downstream community to have sleepless nights, experience frustration, and worry over loss of infrastructure and income. In a province that prides itself on 'neighborliness' – a lack of policy is dividing our communities.

[https://auditor.sk.ca/pub/publications/public\\_reports/2018/12\\_Water%20Security%20Agency%E2%80%94Regulating%20Drainage.pdf](https://auditor.sk.ca/pub/publications/public_reports/2018/12_Water%20Security%20Agency%E2%80%94Regulating%20Drainage.pdf)

Another group that is very concerned about what is happening and what will happen to the water quality in our lakes with this new Policy is the Provincial Association of Resort Communities of Saskatchewan (PARCS). Their recent newsletter outlines their concerns over how WSA is no longer focused on source water protection . <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/PARCS-UPDATE--229--MORE-INFORMATION-ABOUT-THE-WATER-SECURITY-AGENCY.html?soid=1133700154985&aid=xxre6i9klwE>

#### **Contacts for the Media to interview.**

1. Dr Peter Leavitt – please note that he is attending a scientific conference in Europe (03-10 June) and will be available for email questions only
  - a. [Peter.leavitt@uregina.ca](mailto:Peter.leavitt@uregina.ca)
2. Dr Kerri Finlay – please note that she is attending a scientific conference in Europe (03-10 June) and will be available for email questions only
  - a. [Kerri.finlay@uregina.ca](mailto:Kerri.finlay@uregina.ca)
3. Aura Lee MacPherson Chair of the Calling Lakes Ecomuseum and chair of the Saskatchewan Alliance for Water Sustainability
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