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CWRA WEBINAR

The Legacy of Lake Manitoba Regulation on Downstream First Nation Communities

In 2011, flooding in Manitoba and the dire situation endured by the First Nations on the shores of Lake St. Martin made national news. Record water levels destroyed the community occupied by the Lake St. Martin First Nation and caused damage on the reserve lands occupied by the Pinaymootang, Little Saskatchewan and Dauphin River First Nations.

Although the 2011 flood event made headlines, there is a back story to the flood that can be traced to the early 1900s and society's attempts to control the waters of Lake Manitoba and the Assiniboine River at the expense of the downstream First Nation communities.

There is a lengthy record of attempts to control the level of Lake Manitoba that follows the cycles of flood and drought in this region of the prairies. After flooding around Lake Manitoba in the late 1800s an additional outlet channel was dredged through Fairford Reserve lands in approximately 1902 to reduce Lake Manitoba levels. This was ineffective but resulted in part of the reserve becoming an island with no access across the new channel. During the drought of the 1930s a stop log dam was built across the Fairford River in an attempt to control the low water conditions on Lake Manitoba. Communications at the time indicated concerns with drinking water due to reduced flows in the Fairford River and low Lake St. Martin levels.

The existing Fairford River Water Control Structure (FRWCS) was constructed across the Fairford River in 1961. This structure and associated channel improvements were designed to control the levels on Lake Manitoba to a very narrow range of elevations. Within a short time, the Province of Manitoba recognized that this would cause adverse impacts on downstream landowners. As a result, they purchased all the free hold lands below the estimated flood level. They could not, however, purchase and transfer the First Nations lands without Canada's approval and adequate compensation. This did not happen, and First Nation communities remained in the flood zone.

Operation of the FRWCS structure was further complicated by the construction of the Portage Diversion in 1970 to divert water from the Assiniboine River into Lake Manitoba. This diversion had a design capacity approximately double the highest observed outflow rate into the Fairford River under natural conditions.

Through the decades from construction of the FRWCS up until the 2011 flood, many studies were undertaken but little tangible progress was made in mitigating the effects of regulation. In many respects the plight of the First Nations was largely ignored until the 2011 flood which resulted in large scale evacuation of First Nation communities that continues to some extent until today.

This talk will put into perspective the long and sad legacy of Lake Manitoba regulation and its impact on downstream flows, water levels, and communities.

June 25, 2020

12:00 NOON - 1:30 P.M. CDT



FEATURING GUEST SPEAKER:

Eric-Lorne Blais, B.Sc., M.A

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Wood.

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