

Manitoba Federation of Labour

Brief to the

Social and Economic Development Committee

Of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly

On

Bill 46 The Save Lake Winnipeg Act

Monday June 13, 2011

Good Evening,

The Manitoba Federation of Labour is pleased to add its support for this Bill to that already shown by many Manitobans who are concerned about the health of Lake Winnipeg. The working families represented by our affiliated unions have told us at conferences and conventions for years now that something has to be done about the deteriorating environment in our province, particularly Lake Winnipeg. The condition of the lake has a direct impact on many of the members of our affiliated Unions. Our members have principal residences on or near the lake, they own vacation properties there, they work on the lake, they are engaged in occupations that monitor its condition and they enjoy its many recreational opportunities.

At one time, Lake Winnipeg was clean and healthy. Today, it sags under the weight of too many nutrients which promote the excessive growth of algae and other less visible changes to the lake ecosystem. Other serious issues include climate change, the invasion of exotic species and habitat degradation associated with the loss of wetlands and shoreline development.

Recently, I read a story in the Winnipeg Free Press that underscored the seriousness of the situation. It compared the health of Lake Winnipeg to that of Lake Erie when that great lake was widely described as “dead”. The comparison wasn’t favourable. It actually assessed our lake as being worse off than Lake Erie was before it was rehabilitated through joint Canada-US action.

The unhealthy state of Lake Winnipeg is not an emerging issue or a “new story”. Public concern about algae blooms and beaches littered with dead fish has been with us for decades.

The flood that continues to unfold in Manitoba has preoccupied us for months now and demonstrates graphically the need for us to focus more of our attention on our lakes and streams and the huge role they play in our lives. It has demanded herculean effort from provincial and civic workers, our soldiers, our union members and the people that each of you represent in the Manitoba Legislature.

Even now, the wide spread flooding of the province washes nutrients from what is usually crop land and deposits them in our lakes and streams. A great deal of those materials will wind up in Lake Winnipeg where they will have an effect for years to come.

Last fall, the Manitoba Government and General Employees Union approached the Manitoba Federation of Labour and asked us to help organize a support campaign for the Lake Winnipeg Research Consortium, an important element of the fight to restore Lake Winnipeg to health. This proposal resonated with other MFL affiliates because it echoed what we’ve been hearing from our rank and file members.

The Research Consortium was established in 1998 to coordinate scientific research on Lake Winnipeg after it became apparent that its waters had further deteriorated because of the Flood of the Century, the 1997 Red River flood. Its aim is to coordinate scientific research on Lake Winnipeg in order to gain a better

understanding of the biological, chemical and physical processes that are critical to its well-being.

It will create educational opportunities and increased public awareness of the ecology of Lake Winnipeg and the various environmental issues facing the Lake.

Much of the data gathering is done by operating a floating research platform, the *M.V. Namao*.

The Consortium's work is made even more critical by what is now being called the Flood of 350 years.

A month ago, I participated in an event that outlined the support of organized labour for the Research Consortium.

It made public our commitment of financial support for the Lake Winnipeg Research Consortium from the MFL and a number of our affiliates, including:

- The Manitoba Government and General Employees Union
- United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 832
- The Canadian Union of Public Employees; and the
- Allied Hydro Council of Manitoba.

In addition to its donation, the Manitoba Government and General Employees Union took it a step further and announced a second measure – it will provide \$20,000 over five years to the Lake Winnipeg Research Consortium for the establishment of a new graduate student scholarship fund that will support research on Lake Winnipeg.

The new scholarships will support graduate students using the M.V. Namao, and will be in place for the 2012 field research season.

The government of Manitoba and all members who supported the measure are to be commended for voting financial support for this important research effort. But more is needed, particularly in light of recent indications that it will be affected by federal government budget cuts.

- We need more water inspectors to monitor the quality of our lakes and drinking water.
- We need to avoid the short-sighted errors made in the past in Manitoba, and in other jurisdictions in Canada, when testing laboratories were privatized.
- We need to be particularly concerned about the City of Winnipeg's focus on entering into a partnership with a multi-national corporation for water treatment services that has been the focus of a great deal of concern.
- We need better water treatment facilities to deal effectively with the waste produced by our cities and municipalities – water treatment facilities that a focused on state of the art biological nutrient removal.
- We need to be cognizant of the importance of the livestock industry to our agricultural sector and the role it plays in our food supply, but not at an unacceptable cost to our environment and jobs.

Bill 46 is an important step forward in addressing these concerns:

- It gives Cabinet the power to designate Crown lands as “significant” wetlands and to regulate their use.

- It maintains the ban on new or expanded hob barn facilities and the ban on spreading livestock manure on land during the winter.
- Several measures are focused on the Capital Region around Winnipeg. Specifically, the Bill regulates the subdivision of land in the capital region by prohibiting the creation of new septic fields in the Red River corridor of the region, or if the subdivision of land results in parcels smaller than two acres.
- The Bill also requires Planning Authorities in the Capital Region to prepare drinking water and wastewater management plans to confirm that future developments can be serviced by existing infrastructure. The Minister responsible may also extend these planning requirements to municipalities and planning districts outside the Capital Region.
- The Bill directs the City of Winnipeg to either replace or upgrade the City's North End Water Pollution Control Centre by the end of 2014, in order to comply with specified phosphorous and other limits on effluent discharged from the centre. The City must also ensure that its nutrient removal and recycling methods at the centre comply with specified requirements.

These measures, in addition to the others I've outlined, are a significant step down the road to restoring Lake Winnipeg to its former glory. It carries on the work already accomplished to improve the condition of the lake, including the limits placed on the generation of nutrients that make their way into the lake. If the measures in Bill 46 are successful, it will be a template for effective environmental rehabilitation efforts anywhere they are needed, whether in Manitoba or elsewhere in Canada.

This goal is something we owe Manitobans today. A clean, vibrant environment is the cornerstone of our quality of life. Attaining that goal is our responsibility to meet for our children and all future residents of Manitoba. Undoing as much of the damage we have done to the environment as possible, is a debt we owe to global village that we live in.

We live on this planet, but we don't own it. It belongs to those who will come after us.