

FIVE THINGS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT **MUST DO** FOR LAKE WINNIPEG



REPORT CARD YEAR THREE

In December 2020, the Lake Winnipeg Foundation (LWF) and the Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective (LWIC) jointly released *Five Things the Federal Government Must Do for Lake Winnipeg*, a discussion paper presenting concrete and tangible actions to improve the health of Lake Winnipeg. Each action is achievable in five years or less.

The 2020 paper emphasized the importance of leveraging the tools and systems already in place to protect fresh water in Canada – strengthening established programs, enforcing existing laws and regulations, integrating evidence from both science and Indigenous knowledge into decision making, and following through on long-standing federal commitments.

Three years later, we're reviewing the federal government's progress. With just two years remaining in the five-year timeline proposed in the original paper, we highlight the urgent next steps the federal government must take to meet its own objectives to protect and restore water quality and ecosystem health in the Lake Winnipeg watershed, and to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

ABOUT LWF & LWIC



Poplar River. Photo: Kevin Spence.

We are together on Indigenous land.

Lake Winnipeg, the lake we are working to protect, is part of the traditional territories of the Ininiwak (Cree), Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), Nakota and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis nation. Indigenous peoples have cared for Lake Winnipeg since time immemorial.

Founded in 2005 as a membership-based environmental charity, the Lake Winnipeg Foundation (LWF) advocates for change and coordinates action to improve the health of Lake Winnipeg. Since its formation, LWF has enjoyed access to – and influence on – the decision-making processes of colonial crown governments. In that time, the absence of Indigenous peoples from decision-making tables for Lake Winnipeg has been notable.

The exclusion of Indigenous peoples from water governance jeopardizes the health of Lake Winnipeg. Indigenous knowledge is critical evidence developed over generations – evidence that is essential to a well-rounded understanding of the lake and its watershed, and our efforts to protect it.

In 2014, the Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective (LWIC) was established by Indigenous leaders and knowledge carriers from 14 First Nations, with support from LWF. LWIC's purpose is to advance Indigenous peoples' knowledge, values, and practices to protect and restore Lake Winnipeg for all future generations. Indigenous peoples hold responsibilities to the lands and waters which were never ceded.

Together, we acknowledge and thank the original caretakers of the lands and waters. Because of their efforts, we enjoy the many gifts given to us by Lake Winnipeg. We hold ourselves accountable to the seven generations forward and the seven generations back. We honour all who have sacrificed for the land. We honour all our relatives.

HOW WE GRADED

the federal government's performance

LWF and LWIC assigned grades for each immediate action in *Five Things the Federal Government Must Do for Lake Winnipeg*.¹ We reviewed publicly available documents and statements related to federal commitments for Lake Winnipeg. Our assessment considers the five-year timeline in which the actions presented must be achieved.



Fulfilled with evidence of meaningful impact for Lake Winnipeg



On track towards fulfillment with opportunities for improvement



Specific commitments have been made;
No concrete action taken



Little to no commitment articulated



Missed opportunity;
At risk of not being fulfilled within five years

¹ Lake Winnipeg Foundation and Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective, 2020, **Five Things the Federal Government Must Do for Lake Winnipeg**.



RECOGNIZE PHOSPHORUS

as the cause of blue-green algal blooms on Lake Winnipeg

1.1 >> Accept the International Joint Commission’s recommendation of an annual phosphorus-loading target for the Red River to combat the eutrophication of Lake Winnipeg. Request further evidence to justify the proposed nitrogen-loading target.

In October 2022, the government of Canada approved both phosphorus and nitrogen loading targets for the Red River – purportedly to “reduce the occurrence of harmful algal blooms”² – despite decades of evidence demonstrating that nitrogen reduction will not reduce algal blooms in freshwater ecosystems.³ By setting a nitrogen target to address an environmental problem not caused by nitrogen, the Canadian government diverts limited resources and further delays evidence-based action to reduce phosphorus loading to Lake Winnipeg. This dual-nutrient approach to addressing eutrophication is unique to Manitoba⁴ and has hindered progress towards the effective management of algal blooms on Lake Winnipeg. Notably, the International Red River Watershed Board acknowledges that both nutrients have “consistently exceeded the target[s] for several decades.”⁵ In claiming to address both nutrients, the government is succeeding at neither.

D

1.2 >> Set limits for phosphorus in sewage effluent within updated Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulations under the renewed Fisheries Act.

In 2023, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) proposed amendments to the Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulations (WSER). However, no changes were made to the list of deleterious substances⁶ identified in the regulation, and no limits for phosphorus were set – even as phosphorus is recognized as one of the top three water pollutants in Canada.⁷ Instead of increasing freshwater protection, changes to the regulation were intended to “reduce the burden for regulatees,” provide “cost savings for regulatees,” and reduce “monitoring and reporting requirements.”⁸ The federal government has missed an important opportunity to reduce phosphorus pollution from non-compliant wastewater treatment facilities, including the City of Winnipeg’s North End Water Pollution Control Centre. However, opportunities exist for the federal government to strengthen enforcement of existing wastewater legislation and regulation. Specifically, pollution-prevention provisions of the federal Fisheries Act must be upheld as “an important component of the federal government’s overall environmental protection program,” with which compliance is mandatory.⁹

F

NEXT STEPS:

- >> The federal government must explicitly affirm that federal policy and funding to reduce algal blooms in Lake Winnipeg are focused on phosphorus reduction, based on the same evidence that is used to guide federal efforts in other jurisdictions.¹⁰
- >> ECCC must enforce the Fisheries Act prohibition on “the deposit of a deleterious substance of any type in water frequented by fish,”¹¹ in response to the City of Winnipeg’s massive spill of raw sewage into the Red River in February 2024.¹²
- >> ECCC must conduct a further review of the list of deleterious substance prescribed in the WSER, and set limits for phosphorus in wastewater effluent.

NOTES:

- ² International Joint Commission, 2022, **The International Red River Watershed Board to monitor key nutrients to help reduce the impact of harmful blooms in the Red River Basin.**
- ³ CBC Manitoba, 2018, **Billion-dollar nitrogen reduction efforts may have minimal impact on toxic algae blooms: study**; Manitoba Co-operator, 2018, **Nitrogen reduction not the path**; International Institute for Sustainable Development and Lake Winnipeg Foundation, 2023, **Action must be taken to reduce phosphorus inputs to Lake Winnipeg.**
- ⁴ Transboundary efforts to address eutrophication in Lake Erie and Lake of the Woods are focused on phosphorus.
- ⁵ International Red River Watershed Board, 2023, **24th Annual Progress Report.**
- ⁶ A deleterious substance is “any substance that, if added to any water, would degrade or alter... the quality of that water so that it is rendered or is likely to be rendered deleterious to fish or fish habitat.”
- ⁷ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2022, **Canada’s National Pollutant Release Inventory: 2021 data highlights.**
- ⁸ Canada Gazette, 2023, Vol. 157, Number 21, **Regulations Amending the Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulations.**
- ⁹ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2013, **Compliance and enforcement policy for habitat and pollution provisions of Fisheries Act.**
- ¹⁰ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2023, **Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators: Phosphorus loading to Lake Erie**; Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024, **Lake of the Woods Freshwater Ecosystem Initiative**; Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024, **Lake Simcoe Freshwater Ecosystem Initiative**; Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2015, **Phosphorus in aquatic ecosystems.**
- ¹¹ **Fisheries Act**, 2019.
- ¹² House of Commons, February 26, 2024, **Debates: 44th Parliament, 1st Session. Edited Hansard No. 285.**



USE EVIDENCE TO GUARANTEE IMPACT

from every federal government dollar spent to reduce phosphorus loading to Lake Winnipeg

2.1 >> Renew the Lake Winnipeg Basin Program in Budget 2022. Strengthen accountability in funding arrangements to achieve program objectives.

A year later than expected, the federal government's 2023 budget committed \$650 million over ten years to the Freshwater Action Plan.¹³ While this is a significant investment, the minister of Environment and Climate Change, Steven Guilbeault, acknowledged that it does not yet fulfill the Liberal government's \$1-billion election promise in 2021; "we're not quite there yet," he told CBC News.¹⁴ Of the \$650 million, \$420 million is directed to the Great Lakes;¹⁵ it is not yet known how much funding is allocated for Lake Winnipeg. To make the most effective use of limited resources, the Lake Winnipeg Basin Program (LWBP) cannot rely solely on open calls for proposals; indeed, "program officials identified the benefits of using directed funding, to better target projects in hot spots."¹⁶

B

2.2 >> Target the Lake Winnipeg Basin Program and relevant Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada funding programs to known phosphorus hotspots where phosphorus reduction is required.

ECCC's Audit and Evaluation Branch recommends that the LWBP "identify and target actions in portions of the basin that are considered priority watersheds," and LWBP management has committed to implementing a targeted approach by March 31, 2027.¹⁷ The Lake Winnipeg Community-Based Monitoring Network (LWCBMN) provides multi-year empirical data identifying persistent phosphorus hotspots within the larger Lake Winnipeg watershed. LWCBMN's findings are critical in achieving an effective targeted approach.¹⁸ Unfortunately, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Agricultural Climate Solutions – Living Labs program, renewed in 2022, does not prioritize agricultural phosphorus reduction to protect fresh water.¹⁹

B

2.3 >> Conduct robust, site-specific water monitoring of all federally funded phosphorus-reduction projects to quantify outcomes and evaluate program performance.

The LWBP lacks any empirical basis for the phosphorus-load reductions it reports.^{20,21} The program does not require project proponents to measure actual reductions in phosphorus loads achieved by their funded projects. Instead, theoretical estimations of phosphorus reduction are "either provided in final project reports submitted by funding recipients or estimated by Environment and Climate Change Canada"²² based on a 2011 report on Lake Simcoe.²³ ECCC then uses these "estimated phosphorus reductions for each project" to calculate the cumulative impact of the program.²⁴ No auditing, ground-truthing or empirical monitoring verifies or supplements these estimations; instead, these theoretical phosphorus calculations serve as the sole indicator to quantify phosphorus reduction believed to be achieved by the LWBP.

D

NEXT STEPS:

- >> ECCC must disclose the amount of funding allocated for Lake Winnipeg in Budget 2023.
- >> The LWBP must directly and proactively engage strategic partners with the knowledge, experience, and capacity to deliver measurable outcomes toward program objectives.
- >> The LWBP must immediately convene science advisors with relevant expertise to guide efforts to implement a targeted approach for phosphorus reduction by March 31, 2027.
- >> The LWBP must ensure that empirical evidence from the Lake Winnipeg Community-Based Monitoring Network²⁵ informs funding decisions; funded projects must be located in phosphorus hotspots to effectively target the largest sources of phosphorus to Lake Winnipeg.
- >> The LWBP must publicize the locations of all funded phosphorus-reduction projects, overlaid on LWCBMN's phosphorus-hotspot maps, to demonstrate accountability to program objectives.
- >> ECCC must ensure that all funded phosphorus-reduction projects have sufficient resources for robust empirical water monitoring to measure phosphorus reductions achieved.
- >> The LWBP must engage knowledgeable and experienced science advisors to review and refine monitoring plans for each project, to ensure defensible and relevant water-quality data is collected.
- >> ECCC must provide additional resources to support independent project evaluation, where project proponents lack the capacity to conduct necessary monitoring.

NOTES:

¹³ Department of Finance, 2023, **Budget 2023: A Made-In-Canada Plan**.

¹⁴ CBC News, April 4, 2023, **Ottawa says it's making Canada's largest ever investment in protecting fresh water**.

¹⁵ CTV News, March 24, 2023, **Canada commits \$420 million for Great Lakes environmental work during Biden visit**.

¹⁶ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2022, **Evaluation of Freshwater Action Plan: Lake Winnipeg Basin Program**.

¹⁷ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2022, **Evaluation of Freshwater Action Plan: Lake Winnipeg Basin Program**.

¹⁸ Lake Winnipeg Foundation, 2024, **The Lake Winnipeg Community-Based Monitoring Network**.

¹⁹ Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2023, **Agricultural Climate Solutions – Living Labs Program**.

²⁰ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2022, **Evaluation of Freshwater Action Plan: Lake Winnipeg Basin Program**.

²¹ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024, **Reductions in Phosphorus Load to Lake Winnipeg – Key Results**.

²² Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024, **Reductions in Phosphorus Load to Lake Winnipeg – Data Sources and Methods**.

²³ Sealock, L, 2011, Lake Simcoe Clean-Up Fund: Phosphorus Reduction Calculation Report. Great Lakes Management and Reporting Section, Environment Canada.

²⁴ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024, **Reductions in Phosphorus Load to Lake Winnipeg – Key Results**.

²⁵ Lake Winnipeg Foundation, 2024, **The Lake Winnipeg Community-Based Monitoring Network**.





SUPPORT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

in reclaiming and restoring their relationship with water

3.1 >> Co-develop legislation with Indigenous peoples to adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Justice Canada released the UNDRIP Action Plan on June 21, 2023.²⁶ Disappointingly, neither the UNDRIP Act²⁷ nor the action plan were co-developed with Indigenous peoples. Indigenous rights, recognized by UNDRIP and affirmed by the government of Canada, necessitate an approach based on a meaningful partnership without predetermined outcomes. The federal government has repeatedly committed to co-development, defined as “the highest end of the consultation and cooperation spectrum and involves Indigenous peoples and the Government of Canada working together in good faith through a substantive, collaborative, and consensus-based process to develop effective solutions.” Yet, Justice Canada and other departments continue to rely on traditional consultation processes.²⁸ Consultation is limited in focus to the priorities of crown. Tellingly, one of the only items in the 2023 UNDRIP Action Plan related to water is a promise from the Liberal Party’s 2019 election platform²⁹ – the creation of the Canada Water Agency (CWA).³⁰ Framing the CWA as a priority of Indigenous peoples is disingenuous. Its scope and mandate remain vague and offer no assurances of UNDRIP implementation. To appropriately align with UNDRIP, the federal resources allocated to the CWA need to be directed to the formation of an Indigenous-led water agency.³¹

C

3.2 >> Establish and fund an Indigenous task force to ensure meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge alongside science in the third and subsequent editions of the State of Lake Winnipeg report.

In March 2024, the Lake Winnipeg Research Consortium and ECCC co-hosted a special session on re-imagining public reporting on the state of Lake Winnipeg. The discussion focused on the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems and on reporting’s relevance to diverse audiences across the watershed. ECCC committed to share a summary of the dialogue and potential next steps with participants, including Indigenous peoples at the meeting. The session highlighted opportunities for collaboration among Indigenous peoples, scientists, and government representatives to ensure Lake Winnipeg reporting is more relevant and impactful. This dialogue was a preliminary step in a multi-year process to establish collaborative reporting. Going forward, the federal government has an obligation to provide resources for Indigenous rightsholders and knowledge carriers to increase capacity for Indigenous knowledge generation and dissemination. This capacity-building is essential not only to ensure more effective participation in policy and reporting processes, but also to honour commitments as treaty partners and signatories to UNDRIP.

B

NEXT STEPS:

- >> Justice Canada must implement meaningful and thorough co-development processes for ongoing planning and engagement with Indigenous partners.
- >> Justice Canada must establish long-term financial support for Indigenous rightsholders to participate in co-development processes.
- >> Justice Canada must identify resources and expertise needed for all federal departments to establish co-development processes and practice reciprocal relationships.
- >> The Minister of Environment and Climate Change must direct CWA resources to the establishment of an Indigenous-led water agency.
- >> ECCC must establish a multi-stakeholder and rightsholder working group to enable more focused and constructive progress towards publishing a collaborative State of Lake Winnipeg report.
- >> ECCC must provide resources to Indigenous knowledge carriers to co-develop and participate in the reporting process.

NOTES:

²⁶ Justice Canada, 2023, **UNDRIP Act Action Plan**.

²⁷ **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act**, 2021.

²⁸ One exception is **Bill C-61: First Nations Clean Water Act (short title), or an Act respecting water, source water, drinking water, wastewater and related infrastructure on First Nation lands**. This bill was co-developed following a court order and settlement.

²⁹ Liberal Party of Canada, 2019, **Forward: A Real Plan for the Middle Class**.

³⁰ Justice Canada, 2023, **UNDRIP Act Action Plan. Action 49**.

³¹ Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective, 2021, **Creating an Indigenous-led Water Agency**.



Brokenhead Wetland Interpretive Trail; Photo: Paul Mutch



WATER PROTECTION ISN'T EASY, IT'S IMPORTANT

When we first published *Five Things the Federal Government Must Do for Lake Winnipeg*, we considered the federal government to be well situated to rally the resources and expertise needed to increase accountability and collaboration across the Lake Winnipeg watershed. We knew our recommendations would not be simple or easy, but they were intentionally built on existing laws, established agreements, robust evidence, and past commitments. Deliberately, we also warned that the potential formation of a new Canada Water Agency would draw attention away from important freshwater programs and initiatives already in motion.

Now, in the spring of 2024, the Parliament of Canada is set to formally establish the Canada Water Agency to keep fresh water safe, clean and well-managed. Unfortunately, this statement implies that this vital commitment is only now being taken seriously through the establishment of the new agency – betraying the important and ongoing work of dedicated federal water researchers and policy makers.

What of Environment and Climate Change Canada's core mandate to preserve and enhance the quality of the natural environment, including water? What of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's existing responsibilities to manage and sustain the country's fisheries, protect and recover species at risk, and prevent the impact of invasive species?

In establishing the Canada Water Agency, the federal government hopes to have found an easy solution to the country's water challenges. Instead, the government will be faced with the same difficult tasks its existing bureaucracies had already been working to address.

Federal freshwater policy – whether implemented by existing departments or a new agency – should rely on evidence found in science and Indigenous knowledge to make difficult decisions. Federal freshwater policy must be willing to enforce the laws that already exist and hold offenders to account. Federal freshwater policy should not mistake collaboration as a process of building political support, but recognize it as a commitment to work together with respect, accountability, and clear purpose.

From our vantage point, the job of protecting water is not compatible with the political imperative to please as many voters as possible. Effective freshwater protection does mean saying no – using prudent, evidence-based regulation to put a stop to harmful activities, enforce effective mitigation, and ensure long-term sustainability.



INCREASE ENFORCEMENT

of evidence-based policy and practices for freshwater health

4.1 >> Promote coordinated, well-monitored and evidence-based approaches to wetland protection across the Prairie provinces.

Canada is home to 25 per cent of the world's wetlands³² – critical natural ecosystems which sequester phosphorus and carbon to reduce eutrophication and climate change, respectively. Yet over 70 per cent of wetlands in southern/agricultural regions of Canada have been lost to drainage and development.³³ The Federal Policy on Wetland Conservation,³⁴ released in 1991, is outdated – and Canadians are now paying the price for wetland loss. Budget 2023 and Budget 2024 together included over \$70 million in disaster assistance and flood-risk warning systems.³⁵ Of \$7.6 billion in federal disaster assistance paid since 1970, 66 per cent has been paid in the last ten years.³⁶

D

4.2 >> Increase and monitor enforcement of the recently renewed Fisheries Act, Impact Assessment Act and Navigation Protection Act.

Fisheries Act enforcement reporting from 2021-2022³⁷ shows that only 88 per cent of self-reported wastewater systems passed the fish-lethality test. However, even though compliance is mandatory, only a single non-compliant wastewater system is under investigation.³⁸ Lack of transparency is also an ongoing concern. On December 15, 2023, Canadian Kraft Paper Industries Limited was charged for a spill in 2019 that released 23,000 liters of black liquor into the Saskatchewan River.³⁹ For over four years, the federal government did not notify First Nations downstream of the spill, leaving community members unaware and at risk.

D

4.3 >> Develop and implement an evidence-based process with provincial regulators to prevent the establishment and spread of aquatic invasive species in the Lake Winnipeg watershed.

In November 2023, live zebra mussels were found in Clear Lake in Riding Mountain National Park, presenting “a threat of significant and irreversible ecological damage to the lake and downstream waterbodies.”⁴⁰ Clear Lake is upstream of other invaded water bodies in Manitoba,⁴¹ demonstrating the ongoing, human-mediated spread of zebra mussels westward throughout the Lake Winnipeg watershed. Equally concerning is the potential arrival in the Lake Winnipeg watershed of invasive quagga mussels, which, without adequate prevention measures, will soon spread from the Mississippi River.⁴²

D

NEXT STEPS:

- >> The federal government must review and update the Federal Policy on Wetland Conservation and develop a national wetland inventory and monitoring system.⁴³
- >> Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) & ECCC must ensure mandatory compliance with fish habitat protection and pollution prevention provisions of the Fisheries Act.
- >> DFO/ECCC must develop better lines of communication and notification for First Nation and Indigenous governments who may be impacted by spills, including those under investigation.
- >> DFO, in collaboration with the Canadian Border Services Agency, must immediately implement ongoing, evidence-based prevention measures for both zebra and quagga mussels in the Lake Winnipeg watershed. Pilot projects are not enough.⁴⁴

NOTES:

³² Nature Conservancy Canada, 2023, **Wetlands are our natural defenses and need to be conserved.**

³³ Ducks Unlimited Canada, 2024, **Wetlands: A natural defence system for drought, floods and climate change.**

³⁴ Canada, 1991, **The Federal Policy on Wetland Conservation.**

³⁵ Canada, 2024, **Budget 2024: Fairness For Every Generation.**

³⁶ Canada, 2023, **Budget 2023: A Made-In-Canada Plan.**

³⁷ Department of Fisheries and Oceans, 2022, **Annual report to parliament on the administration and enforcement of the fish and fish habitat protection and pollution prevention provisions of the Fisheries Act - 2021-2022**

³⁸ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2013, **Compliance and enforcement policy for habitat and pollution provisions of Fisheries Act.**

³⁹ Environment and Climate Change Canada, December 18, 2023, **Canadian Kraft Paper Industries Limited fined \$1 million for unlawful deposit of effluent into the Saskatchewan River.**

⁴⁰ Parks Canada, 2024, **Facts and FAQs about AIS.**

⁴¹ Manitoba, 2023, **Zebra Mussels (*Dreissena polymorpha*).**

⁴² U.S. Geological Survey, 2023, **Zebra and Quagga Mussel Sightings Distribution.**

⁴³ Ducks Unlimited Canada, 2022, **What's happening to Canada's vanishing wetlands? Without a proper inventory, we won't truly know.**

⁴⁴ Fisheries and Oceans Canada, November 30, 2022, **Government of Canada pilot project adds layer of protection from aquatic invasive species at the border.**



FULFILL JURISDICTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

through concrete action and strengthened accountability

5.1 >> Include Indigenous governments as signatories to the Canada-Manitoba Memorandum of Understanding Respecting Lake Winnipeg and the Lake Winnipeg Basin (the MOU).

Indigenous partners were not included as signatories in when the MOU⁴⁵ was renewed in 2021. On March 22, 2023, the MOU steering committee hosted an Indigenous engagement session⁴⁶ to initiate a dialogue with Indigenous peoples on inclusion in the process. During the meeting, representatives from the steering committee agreed to “work with Indigenous peoples in a better way”. Indigenous participants in the meeting pointed to the need to recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge, to provide capacity building resources to communities, to include youth and elders in the dialogue, and to prioritize the development of strong relationships with Indigenous peoples.

D

5.2 >> Develop an Intergovernmental Action Plan for Lake Winnipeg jointly with provincial and Indigenous governments, and in alignment with the principles of the MOU.

Lake Winnipeg still lacks an outcomes-focused, evidence-based, specific and time-bound action plan that engages federal, provincial, municipal, and Indigenous governments. In 2022, ECCC reported that “a deliverable for the LWBP, namely the implementation of the Lake Winnipeg Basin Adaptive Management Framework, has not yet been achieved, although an approach has been established at the time of the evaluation.”⁴⁷ This adaptive management approach has not been made public – its scope and necessary collaborators are not known.

D

5.3 >> Recognize Indigenous jurisdiction by supporting Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas around Lake Winnipeg that are governed by Indigenous law and that affirm Indigenous rights and relationships to the land.

The federal government has been clear that working with Indigenous peoples is the only way to meet commitments to protect 30 per cent of lands and waters by 2030.⁴⁸ Though the federal government has invested over \$1 billion⁴⁹ in Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), only three such areas have been formally established with agreements in place that required decades to develop. Stable long-term funding is essential for Indigenous nations to develop their capacity to establish and manage protected areas. Short-term project-oriented funding perpetuates a paternalistic relationship between Canada and Indigenous peoples.

C

NEXT STEPS:

- >> The MOU steering committee must continue dialogue with Indigenous partners with the goal of including Indigenous signatories in the renewal of the MOU in 2026.
- >> The federal government must ensure resources are available to support Indigenous governments and peoples, so they may freely participate in partnership development and water management processes.
- >> The MOU steering committee should increase transparency and public awareness of its plans and actions.
- >> The MOU steering committee must share the developed adaptive management approach with Lake Winnipeg stakeholders, Indigenous governments and rightsholders.
- >> ECCC must include the development and implementation of an Intergovernmental Action Plan for Lake Winnipeg as a clear and time-bound deliverable of the renewed LWBP.
- >> ECCC must follow through with its intended support of IPCAs by investing in long-term and core funding for Indigenous-led conservation initiatives.

NOTES:

⁴⁵ Canada & Manitoba, 2021, **Canada-Manitoba Memorandum of Understanding Respecting Lake Winnipeg and the Lake Winnipeg Basin.**

⁴⁶ Canada-Manitoba Lake Winnipeg MOU Steering Committee, March 22, 2023, Indigenous Engagement Session, “What We Heard” Report.

⁴⁷ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2022, **Evaluation of Freshwater Action Plan: Lake Winnipeg Basin Program.**

⁴⁸ Environment and Climate Change Canada, January 31, 2024, **Forty-two Indigenous-led conservation projects across Canada receive federal funding to protect more nature.**

⁴⁹ Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2021, **Government of Canada announces \$340 million to support Indigenous-led conservation**; Department of Finance, 2023, **Budget 2023: A Made-In-Canada Plan.**



GOING FORWARD

Canadians too easily take for granted an abundance of fresh water. Lakes and rivers across the nation seem invulnerable.

Yet, increasingly, we are waking up to troubling changes occurring in our waters – changes that can no longer be ignored. The federal government's decades of short-sighted decisions, minimal environmental enforcement, and disregard for Indigenous peoples' rights have culminated. Water quality is degraded, plant and animal habitats are disappearing, invaluable Indigenous knowledge documenting change is dismissed, livelihoods integrally linked to water are at risk.

Funding announcements and new bureaucracies are symbolic gestures – these alone will not succeed in reversing troubling freshwater trends. We look to the federal government to muster the political will and leadership to take meaningful, measurable action for freshwater protection, by honouring treaties with Indigenous peoples and by basing decisions in well-established evidence.

Federal action now is vital to ensure that future generations can wake up to waters full of life and spirit.

**REPORT CARD
YEAR THREE**



Victoria Beach; Photo: Jeoep Wolfe

Lake Winnipeg Foundation lakewinnipegfoundation.org | **Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective** lwic.org