

More fish for Lake Manitoba

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Selkirk-Interlake MP James Bezan was in Lundar on July 15th to announce a \$19,000 contribution by the federal government for a fish ladder project initiated by the West Interlake Watershed Conservation District (WIWCD). The fish ladder will be installed as part of the Burnt Lake Drain within the RM of Coldwell.

The federal Recreational Fisheries Conservation Partnerships program contribution will match \$19,000 of in-kind donations, for a total project outlay of \$38,000. As a side note, the Harper government recently increased its Fisheries Conservation program funding from \$15 million to \$25 million.

The WIWCD hired Mark Lowdon, Fisheries Biologist for AAE Tech Services, to do an assessment of the Swan Creek Sub District and he identified a weir in the Burnt Lake Drain as a barrier to fish.

Ducks Unlimited installed the weir during the 1970's to improve the wildlife habitat for waterfowl. The fish that were upstream of the weir became, in a sense, trapped, and spawning fish from Lake Manitoba have since been unable to enter the quarter section sized lake created by that weir's installation.

The Burnt Lake Drain is a major spawning ground for many fish species, including northern pike, walleye, white sucker and yellow perch.

The new three-step ladder will allow fish from Lake Manitoba to easily swim into the marsh-lined, nutrient-rich lake. The ultimate goal of the project is to promote population growth of the various fish species.

"The nature-like [ladder] fishway (rock riffles and pools) will also create approximately 300 m² of additional spawning habitat for Walleye or other fishes that utilize the gravel and cobble substrates that make up the fishway for spawning", as stated in the application for the project.

Stan Miller, owner of much of the land around the lake, will donate his time and labour to construct a fence beside the new fishway leading to the lake, all in an effort to prevent his cattle from disturbing the environmentally sensitive area.

Why is he willing to offer his time and labour? "We like nature...and we like going out there and listening to the geese, swans and all kinds of wildlife in the spring and in the fall."

Back in the WIWCD office, MP Bezan gladly accepted an invitation to tour the area, northwest of Lundar, where the fish ladder would be installed.

WIWCD board members Neil Brandstrom and Henry Rosing, along with Linda Miller, WIWCD's Financial Administrator/Manager, showed MP Bezan the obstructing weir and the area selected for the new ladder. One could see that even though the downstream water level was high, fish were still unable to negotiate the weir.

There was also a discussion of installing a carp gate to protect the marshland and lake area upstream from the weir. Carp are an invasive species, and they reduce water quality in smaller lakes and ponds by muddying the water due to their bottom feeding habits; the result is a decline of aquatic plants essential to waterfowl and fish.

The newly funded fishway project will begin this October and the scheduled completion date is November 15th, 2014; therefore, spawning should prove to be more prolific in the Burnt Lake Drain next spring.