

## A decade of failing Lake Winnipeg

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LATELY, whenever I encounter the words “difficult” or “complicated” in political discourse, I replace them with “incompatible with my political agenda” or “requiring an investment I’m unwilling to make.”

Providing safe drinking water for First Nations? It’s not difficult. It simply requires investment.

Reducing phosphorus loading to control algal blooms on Lake Winnipeg? It’s not complicated. It just requires enforcement of environmental regulations within phosphorus hotspots.

Meeting phosphorus licence limits at Winnipeg’s North End sewage treatment plant? Neither difficult nor complicated. Just a simple problem that has become so mired in competing agendas and so obscured by decades of political showmanship that it’s now hard to sort out evidence from ideology.

I’ve buried the lede here. This month marks the 10th anniversary of the Save Lake Winnipeg Act, enacted by Manitoba’s previous NDP government in 2011 “to reduce the excessive amounts of phosphorus and other nutrients coming into Lake Winnipeg that affect the ecological health of the lake.”

Ten years later, based on the province’s own data, we have not succeeded at reducing phosphorus concentrations in the Red River – the largest source of phosphorus to Lake Winnipeg.

Clearly, the Save Lake Winnipeg Act is failing.

The role of phosphorus in feeding algal blooms has been demonstrated over five decades of research at the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) Experimental Lakes Area in northwestern Ontario. These studies have also shown that the complete removal of “other nutrients” — namely, nitrogen — does not reduce algal biomass. That’s because blue-green algae — the stuff that blooms on Lake Winnipeg — can draw nitrogen directly from the atmosphere, literally out of thin air.

Based on IISD-ELA research, algal blooms in lakes

Geneva, Washington, Constance, Erie and many others across the globe have been successfully reduced by controlling phosphorus alone.

Nevertheless, Manitoba’s provincial government insists that nitrogen reduction via biological nutrient removal at Winnipeg’s North End sewage treatment plant is necessary for the protection of Lake Winnipeg. It’s not. On top of this, biological nitrogen reduction is expensive, astronomically increasing the cost of sewage treatment upgrades.

The consequence? Stalled action on critical phosphorus-reduction upgrades that would actually improve Lake Winnipeg’s water quality.

Manitoba’s current Progressive Conservative government has repeatedly committed to “red tape reduction” in order to minimize undue regulatory burdens and save money. However, when it comes to the North End plant, the PCs still cling to the unnecessary nitrogen limits and costprohibitive biological removal methods the NDP wrote into the Save Lake Winnipeg Act — despite the lack of evidence and the enormous price tag.

Faced with these unreasonable requirements for so long, the city’s public service now balks at any request to tackle phosphorus.

Last year, Winnipeg’s water and waste department was asked to assess interim phosphorusreduction options. Rather than study what was possible, however, the city’s public service spent \$381,702 to produce a report that confirmed its own predetermined conclusion that phosphorus compliance is not achievable.

Provincial bureaucrats seem content to take the city’s word for it. Manitoba Conservation and Climate keeps relying on the city to “assess options” and “propose completion dates,” instead of clearly stating, as the environmental regulator, what needs to happen by when to protect Lake Winnipeg from Winnipeg’s sewage effluent.

Over the past year and a half, as a member of the now-disbanded advisory committee on treatment plant upgrades, I’ve watched as disingenuous excuses and toothless enforcement generated reams of paperwork, lots of contracts for consultants — and no action for the lake.

Back in October 2020, the Lake Winnipeg Foundation, the Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective and the International Institute for Sustainable Development released a joint statement identifying tangible opportunities to accelerate phosphorus compliance at the North End plant. The solutions we propose have been effectively implemented in sewage-treatment plants around Canada’s other great lakes to reduce phosphorus levels well below Manitoba’s licence limits.

If these solutions are not put in place in Winnipeg, it will not be because the technology didn’t exist or wasn’t feasible. It will not be because scientific evidence or engineering experience were lacking. Rather, it will be because our elected leaders and public servants decided not to prioritize solutions, preferring to fall back on “difficult” and “complicated.”

It will be because they are more than happy to consider failure inevitable and pass the mess they’ve created on to the next generation.

I do not accept their failure. I’m done with “difficult” and “complicated.” Ten years after Manitoba declared its intention to “save” Lake Winnipeg, it’s time to hold our governments to account for ignoring evidence at our very great expense.

Alexis Kanu is executive director of the Lake Winnipeg Foundation.



**Blue-green algae blooms have become a common occurrence on Lake Winnipeg.**

**KRISTIE PEARSON FILE PHOTO**