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Waldsea Lake cabins in peril; Cabin owners to learn Sunday whether homes need to be demolished; [Final Edition]

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Abstract (Summary)

"Let's face it, the farmers have been doing a super job of draining their ditches into the lake," said cabin owner Dan Reisserscheid, 73. "The problem is Waldsea Lake is a basin and once it fills with water, it stays that way."

"The RM really screwed up," said Reisserscheid. "They should force farmers to close unregistered ditches, but instead they're letting them get away with it."

"If we get another year of excessive runoff and the lake comes up some more, we're still going to have to worry about it," [Reeve Jordan Bergermann] says. "Is that berm going to be high enough to handle another foot or two of water? I don't know."

Full Text (737 words)

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Marie Buschmann has spent the last four months watching her Waldsea Lake cabin disappear into the rising water. Now she fears it will have to be demolished along with 24 other Waldsea Lake cabins damaged irreparably by the floodwaters.

"It's very stressful," says Buschmann, 80. "Everything is covered in mould and I'm sure I will be told it has to come down."

Corrections and Public Safety will tell residents Sunday whether their cabins have been classified for demolition. In July, the building standards division of Corrections and Public Safety inspected 63 cabins damaged by floodwaters, debris or ice along the lake. Cabins were given one of four classifications: demolition or significant repair needed; second inspection needed; safe but with a risk of further damage; or not affected by flood.

"If water has reached as high as the joists or above the floor system, you start to encounter health issues with mould in addition to structural problems that make these cabins unsafe to live in," said Bill Hawkins, chief building official for Saskatchewan.

The province will pick up 90 per cent of the cost of cabin demolitions with owners expected to cover the remaining 10 per cent. Hawkins noted that if owners don't agree with the cabin classifications, they can apply to the province to have another inspection done.

For those with salvageable cabins, the only way to prevent further damage, according to the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority (SWA), is to construct a massive berm in front of the lake. The SWA has hired engineers Clifton Associates Ltd. to design the proposed 1.5-kilometre long structure that will reach as high as five metres. The cost will be covered entirely by the province, according to Humboldt Reeve Jordan Bergermann.

During a meeting at Waldsea Lake hall Thursday night, residents were told the berm should be completed before freeze-up this year to prevent further cabin damage. But for many residents, construction of a berm is not the

solution and raises many questions.

"Where are they going to get the millions of tons of dirt needed to build the berm?" asks Al Gaetz, a cabin owner for 35 years. "How will the run-off and rain water get into the lake from behind the cabins if they are lower than the berm?"

"Nobody has told us anything."

Doug Veness and his family have been coming to their cabin since 1979. He says the lake will never be the same with a berm.

"I don't want to look out my front window and see a mud wall," he says sadly, noting that he expects his cabin to be demolished.

"We used to have a beautiful beach and now there's nothing left."

Controversy has also erupted over the cause of the rising water levels. As of Wednesday, the water level on Waldsea Lake reach 534.63 metres above sea level, almost a whole metre higher than the level on April 3. While the SWA maintains that three years of exceptional precipitation is to blame, many cottagers blame the RM of Humboldt for allowing farmers to drain their land unchecked into the saline lake.

"Let's face it, the farmers have been doing a super job of draining their ditches into the lake," said cabin owner Dan Reisserscheid, 73. "The problem is Waldsea Lake is a basin and once it fills with water, it stays that way."

Reisserscheid said he knows of fellow cabin owners considering a class action lawsuit against the RM of Humboldt, the SWA and some of the farmers who have drained their sloughs into the lake.

"The RM really screwed up," said Reisserscheid. "They should force farmers to close unregistered ditches, but instead they're letting them get away with it."

Bergermann says farmers have sacrificed many hundreds of acres of their own land to keep the lake from reaching its spill level.

"We have farmers who have lost considerable amounts of land to the flooding and when that happens, they lose net worth on their farm. How do you compensate people for that?"

Bergermann also wonders whether the proposed berm will be high enough to protect farmland and cabin owners from future rising water levels.

"If we get another year of excessive runoff and the lake comes up some more, we're still going to have to worry about it," Bergermann says. "Is that berm going to be high enough to handle another foot or two of water? I don't know."

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