

PRESS RELEASE

Harper Government Announces Plans to Shut Down Canada's Experimental Lakes Area - A World-Renown Aquatic Research Facility

The Harper government has taken yet another stab at environmental research - in a move which threatens the health of freshwaters now and for years to come, not only in Canada, but globally.

This morning, an emergency meeting was held at the Freshwater Institute, in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Employees of Fisheries & Oceans learned that Canada's Experimental Lakes Area, a world-renowned aquatic research facility, will be terminated in March 2013. All employees of the Experimental Lakes Area will receive "affected" letters, part of the 1000 employees nationally in Fisheries & Oceans that are being told their services are no longer required. The justification provided was that the work conducted at Canada's ELA no longer fits within the Government's mandate.

Canada's Experimental Lakes Area (ELA) is a unique facility for aquatic research – there is no other comparable facility in the world. The ELA, located in northwestern Ontario, consists of 58 small lakes and their watershed that have been set aside for research. Since 1968, this facility has been a natural laboratory to study the physical, chemical, and biological processes in lake ecosystems.

Why is the ELA a vital resource to Canadians? The tremendous value of this facility lies in the ability of scientists to conduct whole-ecosystem manipulation experiments. These studies have provided sound scientific knowledge for the development of environmental policies both nationally and internationally. The key areas of influence have been in understanding and managing algal blooms, acid rain, climate change, mercury pollution, greenhouse gas production, hydroelectric reservoir development, and endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

Research at the ELA has demonstrated that smaller scale experiments cannot provide reliable information for managing whole lakes. Thus by shutting down this facility, the Government of Canada is stamping out the ability of scientists in both government and academia to conduct the research required to formulate sound environmental policies.

The scientific output of Canada's ELA has been impressive to say the least – it has produced 745 peer-reviewed scientific articles, 126 graduate theses, 102 book chapters and synthesis papers, 185 data reports, and several books. ELA scientists have been the recipients of numerous prestigious international water awards, including the Stockholm Water Prize, the International Tyler Prize for Environmental Science and the Gerhard Herzberg Gold Medal for Science and Engineering.

What is surprising about the Government's decision is that Canada's ELA has received outstanding reviews by Canada's Auditor General's office, and the Government has invested ca. 3 million in new infrastructure over the last 10 years. Furthermore, the annual operating budget (not including researcher salaries) of Canada's ELA facility is only \$600K, a cost which is split between Fisheries & Oceans Canada and Environment Canada. Research expenses are largely funded by external agencies and institutions.

This latest move by the Harper Conservatives is part of a much larger concerted effort to undermine the legal and scientific capabilities of key federal departments like Fisheries and Oceans and Environment Canada.

Quotes from Prominent Aquatic Scientists:

“ELA whole lake experiments have shown time after time that smaller scales of experimentation do not provide a reliable basis for environmental policy, because they cannot evaluate key ecological processes that take years to respond. This is why it has influenced policies on nutrient management, acid rain and several other important freshwater management issues not just nationally, but globally. Few scientific projects of any sort have had the global impact of ELA, and certainly none can match it on the basis of scientific return per dollar spent. It is a unique facility that cannot simply be resurrected when the good times return”.

Dr. David Schindler, OC, FRSC, FRS, Killam Memorial Professor of Ecology, University of Alberta
Phone: (780) 492-1291; Email: dschindl@ualberta.ca

“The long-term data that scientists at ELA have gathered over the decades are respected internationally for their quality and impact. The ELA program was recognized nationally and internationally as a gold standard for this type of work. Whether they acknowledge it or not, politicians desperately need these data for evidence-based policy decisions. Now more than ever we need such coordinated, long-term programs. This is a travesty not just for Canada but the world”.

Dr. John Smol, FRSC, Canada Research Chair in Environmental Change, Queen’s University
Phone: 613-533-6147; cell 613-328-2522 ; Email: smolj@queensu.ca

“ELA is Canada's flagship environmental research centre. The work done at this site has been instrumental in providing the information that has been the foundation of many of Canada's environmental policies and regulations concerning our aquatic resources. It has also been instrumental in placing Canada at the forefront globally in aquatic sciences, and is recognized by scientists on every continent as a world-leading research centre”.

Dr. Peter Dillon, FRSC, Professor in Watershed Biogeochemistry, Trent University
Phone: (705) 748-1011 x7536; Email: pdillon@trentu.ca

"This very ill-advised decision will seriously impair Canada's, and the world's, ability to detect, understand, and mitigate pressing environmental issues that affect our quality of life. ELA is a global flagship for sound and rigorous water science. Canada will lose its lead role in such studies and, as a result, the quality of environmental decision-making will deteriorate at a time we can least afford it. The proposed closing is especially dumbfounding given the low costs of operating the ELA and its astonishing productivity and impact. Certainly this proposal should be abandoned."

Dr. James Elser, Regents' Professor, Arizona State University, 2012 Hutchinson Medalist,
Association of the Sciences of Limnology and Oceanography. Email: j.elser@asu.edu