

# The Lake St. Martin Story

## An Overview of 50+ Years of Artificial Flooding

### Key Takeaways

- Water control structures have disempowered and displaced First Nations, destroying livelihoods in the name of development, upholding colonial systems and perpetuating environmental racism
- Flood mitigation in Manitoba must centre the knowledge and voices of those that have historically and are presently impacted the most

### Lake St. Martin and Lake St. Martin First Nation

Lake St. Martin First Nation (Obashkodeyaang) is an Anishinaabe Nation located on Treaty 2 in the Interlake Region of Manitoba, about 225km northwest of Winnipeg.<sup>3</sup> The people of Lake St. Martin First Nation (LSMFN) have lived on the shores of Lake St. Martin for generations, with the Nation residing on the northwest banks of the lake. Traditionally fishers and hunters, the Nation has a deep relationship and rich history with the lands and waters in the area.<sup>3</sup>

In 2011, LSMFN and two other First Nations were flooded out and displaced by the operation of a provincial water control structure used to protect Lake Manitoba cottagers and farmers by diverting flood water to Lake St. Martin.<sup>3,4</sup>

### Proposed Outlet Channels

The Lake Manitoba and Lake St. Martin Outlet Channels Project (The Project) was proposed as a response to the 2011 flood and severe flooding in 2014 along the Assiniboine and Dauphin River basins. The Project was proposed by the previous Progressive Conservative government to construct two outlet channels that would run about 24km long and drain water from Lake Manitoba directly into Lake St. Martin and from Lake St. Martin into Lake Winnipeg. The Project would cost an estimated \$540 million and would be co-funded by the Province of Manitoba and the Government of Canada.<sup>2</sup>

Many First Nations have opposed the proposed project, stating that increased water levels would continue to negatively impact Nations.<sup>7</sup>

### Current Status and Paths Forward

In June 2024, the federal government released a 400-plus-page environmental assessment report on The Project.<sup>2</sup> After review, Environmental Minister Stephen Guilbeault deemed The Project may lead to “significant adverse environmental effects” on 30 Indigenous communities’ use of land and resources for traditional purposes.<sup>6</sup>

As of November 2024, the provincial NDP government has asked the federal government to pause the The Project, while they consider other flood mitigation options.<sup>6</sup>

In a November 2024 release, the Interlake Reserves Tribal Council (IRTC), which represents seven First Nations including LSMFN, stated, “First Nations know best about what is in our own best interest... [the province and IRTC] agreed that the Outlet Channels project should not proceed without first building consent with affected Indigenous communities or if it destroys or seriously impacts commercial or subsistence fishing, Indigenous rights, or cultural sites.”<sup>8</sup>



Source: Government of Manitoba, Map of Lake Manitoba and Lake St. Martin Proposed Outlet Channels



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## History of Interlake Water Control Structures and the 2011 “Superflood”

LSMFN lived sustainably until the 1960s when water control structures built by the provincial government without Indigenous consultation and for the betterment of settler lives, began to flood and permanently saturate the ground under LSMFN. This artificial flooding negatively impacted agricultural and fishing practices LSMFN relied on.<sup>3</sup>

Water control structures such as the Fairford water control structure (built 1961) and the Portage Diversion (built 1971) worked together to divert water to Lake St. Martin. The Portage Diversion sent water from the Assiniboine River to Lake Manitoba and the Fairford River. The Fairford control structure on the Fairford River then sends the water to Lake St. Martin, whose water eventually flows down Dauphin River and ultimately into Lake Winnipeg.<sup>2</sup>

The Fairford water control structure played a critical role in the 2011 “superflood” - due to high water levels on the Assiniboine River, the control structure was opened to divert the maximum amount of water to Lake St. Martin. Water levels reached a historic peak of 817.5 feet above sea level and on May 8th, 2011 the entire community of Lake St. Martin was forced to evacuate and were permanently displaced.<sup>3</sup>



Source: Government of Manitoba, Lake St. Martin, May 17, 2011

### Impacted Sustainable Livelihood Assets

1. Human
2. Social
3. Natural
4. Physical
5. Financial

## Community Impacts

The 2011 artificial “superflood” and subsequent evacuation greatly impacted LSMFN, with the 5 key sustainable livelihood assets on the right negatively impacted. Flood impacts include social issues such as increased suicide and family violence, health impacts such as depression and worsening of chronic illnesses, environmental impacts such as water contamination, and physical impacts such as housing and infrastructure deterioration.<sup>3</sup>

Though some community members have been able to return to Lake St. Martin, many are still displaced and unable to return home. About 100 community members have died before being able to return home.<sup>5</sup>

“The impacts of the 2011 flood on First Nations such as Lake St. Martin, still continue to suffer to this day from the displacement and impacts of the government policy that allowed their reserve lands and ancestral territories to be flooded and allowed their citizens to languish in hotel rooms in Winnipeg and elsewhere for a decade where, tragically, many died and never had a chance to return home.” - Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs<sup>1</sup>

In 2021, the Manitoba Court of King’s Bench ruled the province was partially responsible by building man-made flood diversion infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> Though this resulted in an \$85.5M settlement for those affected,<sup>1</sup> the lack of comprehensive needs assessment has been detrimental to the health and well-being of the community. Many community members still feel the effects of the 2011 flood and evacuation, including sustained disconnect to traditional livelihoods and to the land and a continued struggle to rebuild a sustainable, new community.<sup>3</sup>



### *Flooding Hope: The Lake St. Martin First Nation Story*

A short documentary highlighting the effects of the 2011 flood and displacement, through the voices for Lake St. Martin First Nation members.



## References

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