

Inaction on Rising Water Levels in the Quill Lakes Receives International Attention

Dubai, UAE | 28 October 2018 – Mismanagement of the crisis surrounding rising water levels at the Quill Lakes was highlighted during the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The *Global Wetland Outlook* has outlined that wetlands are being destroyed at 3 times the rate of forests. At the same time, all parties to the Ramsar Convention are called upon to centre efforts to halt and reverse wetland loss. Thus, the inaction to address the main threat to the Quill Lakes, unlawful wetland drainage, has undermined the provision of ecosystem services from this Ramsar Wetland of International Importance is alarming.

The Quill Lakes provide a buffer to the effects of extreme weather events although current water levels leave little room for additional water storage. Consequently, the Quill Lakes now risk spilling saline water into freshwater systems including Last Mountain Lake, which is also a Ramsar site. In addition, the Quill Lakes is an Important Bird Area and provides nesting and staging habitat for the over 300 bird species, including species on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species such as the Piping Plover and the Whooping Crane. With the 6 m rise in water level, this habitat has been destroyed.

Despite expectations that Ramsar Information Sheets be updated every 6 years, Canada last submitted an update on the Quill Lakes in 2001. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of the Quill Lakes is long overdue. If this assessment establishes that the ecological character of this Ramsar site is at risk of being permanently changed by this drainage activity, the Government of Canada should report this change to the Ramsar Convention and list the Quill Lakes on the Montreux Record.

The Quill Lakes is just one crisis point in a province with between 100,000 and 150,000 illegal wetland drains. It is disheartening that wetland conservation in the province has needed to depend on litigation to compel the Saskatchewan Government to enforce its drainage legislation and to commit to environmental assessment. As guardians of this global patrimony, the Saskatchewan Government has an obligation to adopt a binding, wetland conservation strategy before it pursues further drainage through Conservation and Drainage Districts.

Faced with continued provincial inaction, the Government of Canada must heed the *Global Wetland Outlook's* call to strengthen legal and policy arrangements to conserve all wetlands. Along with climate change, wetland conservation is a national concern and within the authority of the federal government to act. As a signatory to the Ramsar Convention, Canada has committed to the wise use of wetlands, however, a precondition of wise use is a comprehensive wetland inventory that facilitates the tracking of wetland trends. Although there has been recent investment to develop Canada's Sustainability Indicators, this investment has not prioritized completing the wetland inventory. The importance of healthy and resilient wetlands to Canada's ability to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, cannot be overstated.

Note to editors

About the Ramsar Convention

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the global framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands. The Convention was signed in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and entered into force in 1975. Since then, 170 countries, have acceded and become Contracting Parties. Canada joined Ramsar in 1981 and, therefore, committed to the wise use of all the wetlands in its territory to maintain their ecological characteristics. In addition, Canada has designated 37 wetland sites as a Wetlands of International Importance because of the valuable ecosystem services they provide. The Quill Lakes were designated in 1987 as a Wetland of International Significance under the Ramsar Convention. Last Mountain Lake was designated in 1982. Currently there 2331 designated Ramsar Sites globally, covering an area of almost 250 million hectares, an area larger than Mexico.

The Global Wetland Outlook is available online at: <https://www.global-wetland-outlook.ramsar.org>

For more information contact:

Professor Patricia L Farnese
College of Law, University of Saskatchewan
Patricia.farnese@usask.ca (306) 966-6063

For more information about impacts to birds:

Ruth Friendship-Keller
rfriendshipkeller@birdscanada.org