Closure of **Experimental Lakes Area** Just One Battle in Government’s War on Science

by Maude Barlow and David Schindler

In recent omnibus budget legislation, the Harper government cut funding to the Experimental Lakes Area, closing it permanently on March 31, 2013. In this op-ed, which originally appeared in the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, Council of Canadians National Chairperson Maude Barlow and David Schindler, professor of ecology at the University of Alberta and founding director of the Experimental Lakes Area, question the government’s decision and sound the alarm about increased threats to Canada’s water. The Council of Canadians has been part of the fight to save the ELA and continues to speak out to protect our fresh water.

The Experimental Lakes Area (ELA) is an internationally renowned freshwater research centre that has been studying what makes water sick and what makes it well for more than four decades.

Located on dozens of freshwater lakes in a remote area of northern Ontario, the ELA has conducted groundbreaking work on acid rain, algal blooms, climate change and mercury contamination.

Scientists and governments around the world have recognized and used its findings in their research and policy making. The ELA has given Canada a stellar reputation in freshwater research, and closing it would be like France closing the Louvre.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Conservative government claims this move is part of a cost-cutting exercise. Yet Fisheries and Oceans has run the ELA for a mere $2 million a year, a tiny amount compared to the $30 million spent by the government to propagandize the War of 1812.

The far more likely reason for closing the ELA is that it was conducting research into the effects on freshwater of endocrine disrupters, mercury and other byproducts of extractive industries the government promotes, and its findings were beginning to show serious, but preventable, damage to Canada’s freshwater heritage.

The ELA is just one battle in the Conservative government’s war on aquatic and environmental science. It is also killing the Global Environmental Monitoring System, an inexpensive project that monitors more than 3,000 freshwater sites around the world for a UN database Canada has proudly hosted for decades. The Harper government is systematically dismantling almost every law, regulation, program or research facility aimed at protecting freshwater in Canada and around the world.

The government gutted the Fisheries Act, the most powerful tool Canada had to protect water. The new law no longer protects habitat and is limited to “serious harm” to fish that have commercial, recreational or aboriginal purposes. It killed the Navigable Waters Protection Act, stripping protections from 99 per cent of lakes and rivers in Canada.

Major pipelines and interprovincial power lines now have the green light to cross over and under more than 31,000 lakes and 2.25 million rivers without federal scrutiny.

To hasten energy exploration and development, the government repealed the existing Canadian Environmental Assessment Act and replaced it with a weaker version that will give final decision-making over a project to cabinet, regardless of what the assessment panel recommends. Under the new rules, 3,000 environmental assessments are now cancelled. Many involve Canada’s waterways.

The Harper government has singularly targeted independent science and scientists, shutting down dozens of research projects and facilities conducting basic scientific research on water.

Of paramount concern for basic science is the elimination of the grants programs administered by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, which funded operations at experimental research facilities.

Gone, too, are the 24-year-old national roundtable on the environment and economy, an independent source of expert advice, the National Science Adviser, and funding for the 34-year-old Canadian Environmental Network that acted as a link between 640 small environmental groups and Ottawa.

Governments and communities around the world are moving to protect their precious water systems to ensure they will be here for future generations. What a travesty that Harper has decided to sacrifice our freshwater heritage to please his industry friends. We will all live to regret this.

**Update:** The Ontario government announced in late April it will provide funding to keep the ELA open. We would like to thank everyone who kept up the public pressure and participated in our urgent “48 Hours to Save the ELA” action alert. Nearly 4,000 Council members sent messages to Ontario Premier Wynne and Manitoba Premier Selinger calling on them to save the ELA – and it worked!