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Tories shut down 'groundbreaking' freshwater research station

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The federal government is closing a research station scientists have used for decades to study how pollutants like acid rain and phosphates affect lakes.

The Experimental Lakes Area is in Northwestern Ontario, about 250 kilometres east of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Since 1968, government and university scientists have used its 58 small lakes to test hypotheses about freshwater ecosystems. One experiment has been running for 40 years.

Employees were told Thursday, said Roberto Quinlan, a biologist at York University, but he noted they were also informed the government would not make an official announcement.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans said in a statement later Thursday it would no longer conduct research that requires "whole lakes or whole lake ecosystem manipulation," but that "every attempt will be made to transfer the ownership of the facility to universities or provinces."

The Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada is criticizing the fisheries for withdrawing funding from the Experimental Lake Areas program.

"A region of remote lakes has been dedicated, since the late 1960s, to whole-lake ecosystem research. It has been the site of groundbreaking studies into the effects of pollutants, acid rain, freshwater aquaculture, and hydroelectric dams on freshwater ecosystems," the union said in a news release.

John Smol, a professor at Queen's University in Kingston, said closing the facility is a "travesty, not just for Canada but for the rest of the world."

He said data from experiments carried out at the lakes "were critical in showing we can't have phosphates in detergents and that acid rain causes marked ecosystem changes."

David Schindler, a professor at the University of Alberta, said employees were told that the facility will be closed as of March, 2013, and that universities, not governments, should be doing this kind of science. But he argued this type of large-scale, long-term research requires government support.

"I think we have a government that considers science an inconvenience."

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