

Moving Water by Michael Hall



In the mid-1960s, Ernest Manning's Social Credit government developed a grand water-diversion plan. PRIME

(Prairie Rivers Improvement and Management Evaluation) showed how Alberta's 16 rivers could be dammed and diverted so their waters could be moved south to farms and cities. Albertans were wary of the cost of the plan and uncomfortable with the boldness with which it would reconfigure God's design. In 1971, they voted in Peter Lougheed's Conservatives, whose campaign slogan was "PRIME is a Crime." Though Lougheed's and Getty's governments built some of the dams the plan recommended, they recognized that a province-wide water-diversion plan was unpopular, and PRIME, at least in name, was dropped.

In December 2001, Environment Minister Lorne Taylor reintroduced the idea of river diversion. This time around, the theological objections were largely replaced by environmental concerns. More objectionable to many, though, was the commodification of water that results from transfers. Putting a price on something so essential seems absurd and wrong. As long as a community—or farmer or oil development—draws its water from a local source, this is not a problem: the water is seen as a simple necessity, and users pay, and expect to pay, a nominal fee for purification, distribution, licensing and so on. But when water is

moved from one place to another, it begins to look like a natural resource—something we should buy and sell on the open market.

With drought, urban growth, industrial development and global warming, water is becoming more scarce and water transfers, large and small, more common. As a result of recent changes in legislation, farmers are beginning to sell their irrigation allotments to their neighbours, and dry communities like Lacombe have major water pipelines in the works. As water is increasingly transferred and bought and sold, it is in danger of falling under NAFTA, becoming a commodity regardless of whether or not we want it to.

One solution to this problem seems obvious: charge for water use. Urban citizens might use it more sparingly, the oil industry might shift to brackish water or CO₂ for its extraction processes, and farmers might irrigate more efficiently. This seems to lead to a contradiction: we can prevent the commodification of water by putting a higher price on it. But having government restrict water use through financial disincentives is different from allowing the market to control it. As long as only our government sells our water—and sells it only to us—it will not become a market good.

Lorne Taylor's water strategy draft, released in March, encourages the private sale of water allocations, but it also proposes fees for water use. If the latter is pursued, and the former is not, we may learn that using less water is more sensible than moving rivers.



Amber Bowerman is our assistant editor and staff writer. For this issue she has written an article, a report and a book review (pages 40, 53 and 70).



Scott Dutton is our art director. He built and photographed the ark for the short story (page 64) and created the water injection diagram on page 46.