

# Premier doesn't commit to protect Archibald Lake, opens door for heritage status during meeting with SMRA

**By Alec Bruce, Local Journalism Initiative reporter**

SHERBROOKE – While Nova Scotia Premier Ian Rankin remains guarded about designating Archibald Lake as a protected wilderness area, he will look into nominating the St. Mary's River for Canadian Heritage River status, says the president of the St. Mary's River Association (SMRA).

Following a 30-minute video meeting with Rankin Tuesday morning (June 22), Scott Beaver told *The Journal* that although the premier "is non-committal about Archibald Lake and says that his department is looking at that right now... he did say he'd go to the environment department and see what he can do [about] the Canadian Heritage River System designation. He was still non-committal,

but he was very interested in that designation." Neither the premier nor members of his staff were available for comment before press time.

Beaver said the meeting convened by the SMRA to ask that special designations be conferred on both Archibald Lake and the St. Mary's River "went well ... You can tell, obviously, he's [Rankin] a very busy man right now with what's on his plate, with COVID."

The fate of Archibald Lake has been an open question since January 2020, when the province announced it was considering the 684-hectare site just north of Sherbrooke, along the St. Mary's River, for wilderness status. Such a move would effectively undermine plans by

Atlantic Gold to build an open-pit mine at nearby Cochrane Hill, because it would eliminate a ready supply of fresh water for resource extraction.

Atlantic Gold has already delayed the proposed mine's opening by several years, citing as reasons its other development priorities near Fifteen Mile Stream and Beaver Dam and uncertainty surrounding Archibald Lake. In October, and again last month, the province said it had still not reached a decision about the lake site's designation.

The CBC reported on June 22 that a socio-economic study – a necessary step in the process – has been delayed due, in part, to concerns at

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the Department of Energy and Mines that the in-house exercise has not benefitted enough from outside expertise.

Beaver, whose conservation organization opposes Atlantic Gold's plans for the area, said Premier Rankin gave no indication if or when a decision about Archibald Lake will be reached.

"He didn't have a whole lot of information to give us on it," he said. "It was a bit different story when it came to the St. Mary's River heritage question."

Earlier this year, the SMRA asked the provincial government to nominate the St. Mary's River for Canadian River Heritage status. If designated, the watercourse

would join the Shelburne River in southwestern Nova Scotia and the Margaree-Lake Ainslie River in Cape Breton as one of only three systems in the province – and only 41 nationwide – to receive the coveted designation, which is administered jointly among Canadian federal, provincial and territorial governments.

Beaver has acknowledged that his group's decision to seek heritage status is a strategic move designed to sway public opinion against encroaching industry. He's also conceded the designation would be, from a legal standpoint, largely toothless.

"This is absolutely strategic," he told *The Journal* last year. "It's another thing we can use against [Atlantic Gold]

and other mines that could come in the future, to try to keep them out of the river valley."

Prior to the June 22 meeting, Beaver said in an email, "By designating the river, we are contributing to an intact wilderness corridor, protecting biodiversity and broadening a mosaic of protected properties. [This] could contribute to positioning the St. Mary's River [as] one of Nova Scotia's great environmental achievements."

Following the meeting, Beaver said, "The most positive part was him [Rankin] talking about the heritage river and that he would look into that with this department. If that is the case, and he can push that along a little bit, that would be very helpful for us."

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