



Media Release

Raw sewage, toxic runoff plague Ontario's lakes and rivers

Continuing loss of natural areas that filter pollution compounds the problem

TORONTO November 13, 2018 – The Ontario government continues to allow raw sewage to overflow into Ontario lakes and rivers at an alarming rate, says a new report by Dianne Saxe, Environmental Commissioner of Ontario. Back to Basics, Saxe's 2018 Environmental Protection Report, outlines how Ontario's waters are being poisoned by raw sewage and harmful runoff laden with fertilizer and road salt.

"It is unbelievable that in 2018, the government allows this much filth into our lakes and rivers," said Saxe. "These are the places Ontarians spend time with their families, where they swim and fish. These shorelines and waters are home to Ontario's rich biodiversity, and to us."

In 2017-2018, raw sewage overflowed into southern Ontario waters 1,327 times – 766 of these from 57 outdated municipal sewer systems that combine sewage with stormwater. Saxe added that provincial standards for industrial toxic wastes poured into our waterways are now 25 years old, and are likely outdated.

Saxe is also very concerned about the province's lack of commitment to continue funding for Ontario's source water protection program. This program addresses hundreds of significant threats to municipal drinking water sources across the province. It was formed as part of the government's response to Walkerton's drinking water crisis 18 years ago.

"Through Walkerton's tragedy, we learned how important it is to be vigilant about protecting sources of drinking water," said Saxe. "This is no time for the government to turn its back on source water protection."

Wetlands and woodlands continue to be destroyed by agriculture and development. These areas help filter pollutants from water, reduce flooding, protect against soil erosion, filter our air and provide critical habitat for many of Ontario's species at risk. Basic ecosystem function requires 30 per cent forest cover, and some parts of Ontario have only three per cent left. Three quarters of southern Ontario's wetlands have been lost. Some areas in southwestern Ontario have so little wetlands and woodlands left, they are at serious risk of flooding. The government should encourage property owners to protect these areas by increasing tax relief and reducing red tape.

Wildlife diseases can have critical impacts on biodiversity, human health and the economy. Chronic wasting disease is now in deer on our doorstep. Saxe's report also highlights the good work reporting on biodiversity by the Ontario Biodiversity Council. The government leans heavily on their work to justify underfunding its own, but has not reciprocated with the modest funding commitments that they need.

“Small changes can better protect Ontario’s water, wetlands, woodlands and wildlife,” concluded Saxe. “My report offers sensible solutions. Many cost relatively little and would yield big rewards.”

Back to Basics, Volumes 1 to 4, as well as the government’s Environmental Bill of Rights report cards, can be reviewed at eco.on.ca.

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*The **Environmental Commissioner of Ontario** is an independent officer of the Legislature who reports on government progress on environmental protection, climate change and energy conservation. The ECO is the province's environmental watchdog and guardian of Ontarians' environmental rights.*

REMARKS

Dianne Saxe, Environmental Commissioner of Ontario

2018 Environmental Protection Report – *Back to Basics*

Legislative Media Studio, Queen's Park

10:00 a.m., Tuesday, November 13, 2018

Check Against Delivery

Introduction

Bonjour à toutes et à tous.

My name is Dianne Saxe and I have the honour of being your Environmental Commissioner.

I am an independent, non-partisan officer of the Legislature appointed by all MPPs.

I am the guardian of the Environmental Bill of Rights and I am required to report to the Legislature each year on energy, on environment and on progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, without fear or favour.

This is my third report to the Legislature on the environment, and the province's compliance with, and Ontarians' use of their environmental rights. This 4-volume report, *Back to Basics*, covers the fiscal year of April 1, 2017 to March 31, 2018.

Volume 1 - Environmental Bill of Rights

The environment is too important, too easily damaged and too easily overlooked to be left entirely up to government. The Environmental Bill of Rights gives Ontarians the right to participate in government decisions that significantly affect the environment.

Today, I report more reasons why Ontarians should not blindly assume that the province is doing a good job of environmental protection.

But there was some progress worth celebrating. For example, in 2017/2018, it was good to see so many Ontarians using their environmental rights, and

government taking its obligations under the Environmental Bill of Rights more seriously.

One clear win was the government getting started on long-overdue improvements to the Environmental Registry – the tool that Ontarians use most to exercise their environmental rights.

These improvements should make it easier for Ontarians to know about, to understand, and to comment on government proposals.

So how is Ontario's environment doing?

Water, wetlands, woodlands and wildlife: these are some of the basics that we think of when we talk about "the environment." We know them, we care about them.

Is the government doing a good job looking after them? Unfortunately, Ontario leaves troubling gaps in its protections for these valuable natural resources and these gaps do a lot of damage.

The good news is that small changes in government action could have real impacts. My recommendations detail smart, sensible solutions, many of which cost relatively little, but could yield big rewards.

Volume 2 - Water

In the 18 years since the Walkerton contaminated drinking water tragedy, much has been done to make drinking water sources safer for 82% of Ontarians.

Hard-working source protection committees have identified hundreds of significant pollution threats to municipal drinking water sources. Conservation authorities and municipalities have taken thousands of actions to manage them.

But committees have not been given the tools they need to regulate some important threats, such as some fuel tanks, some manure-spreading and contaminated sites.

And uncertainty about funding after March 31 leaves this critical program up in the air. Through Walkerton's tragedy, we learned how important it is to be vigilant about protecting sources of drinking water. This is no time for the government to turn its back on source water protection.

The source protection framework does not protect most Ontario lakes, rivers and groundwater, including the drinking water sources of Ontarians with private wells, or in most northern and Indigenous communities.

Instead, the government still allows an astonishing amount of pollution to pour into our lakes and rivers.

Raw municipal sewage, agricultural runoff, toxic industrial wastewater and road salt are four significant sources of pollutants that threaten Ontario's waters.

The Ontario government has known about this for decades, but has consistently chosen not to regulate these pollutants effectively.

First, in heavy rains, 44 Ontario municipalities still overflow their combined sewers and spill filthy, bacteria-laden sewage into lakes and rivers – 766 times last year alone, from Toronto to Moonbeam.

Despite closed beaches and decades of concern, the government has still not required these municipalities to do everything practicable to stop their overflows. For example, municipalities could do more with stormwater fees and green infrastructure to keep stormwater from flooding combined sewers.

Second, the government has not done enough to stop agricultural runoff into fresh water, a major contributor to toxic algae. Some of it comes from the practice of spreading manure and fertilizer on snow or frozen ground. Quebec and Manitoba have banned the practice because it is harmful, completely ineffective and contributes to excessive runoff – a needless waste.

Why is Ontario still sitting on its hands?

Third, despite promising to virtually eliminate persistent toxics in water pollution, the provincial government still allows industries to dump large amounts of 58 toxic wastes directly into lakes and rivers, including lead, arsenic, and nonylphenols.

The limits were set 25 years ago, based on studies from the 1980s, to suit then-available technology. Government promises to keep the limits up to date have never been kept.

And fourth, the government continues to allow road salt to poison lakes and rivers, even though much of it is used without improving public safety.

It is unbelievable that in 2018, the government allows this much filth into our lakes and rivers. These are the places Ontarians spend time with their families, where they swim and fish. These shorelines and waters are home to Ontario's rich biodiversity, and to us.

Josephine Mandamin, an Anishinaabe grandmother, walked around the Great Lakes a few years ago to remind us all that water is precious.

This pollution of our waters is neither inevitable nor necessary. Ontarians should not keep tolerating the government failures that allow so much pollution of our waters.

Volume 3 - Wetlands and woodlands

Another part of the problem is that we are losing our wetlands and woodlands.

Wetlands and woodlands are critically important to absorb pollution, buffer flooding and provide wildlife habitat.

Already most of southern Ontario has too few of them for healthy ecosystems.

We need every one of the wetlands and woodlands we have left, and we will need them even more as population grows and climate change becomes more severe.

Southern Ontario was once 25% wetlands. Today, it is less than 7%. In just ten years, from 2000 to 2010, southern Ontario lost close to 15,000 acres of wetlands. Yet despite years of promises, the government continues to allow the loss of the wetlands and woodlands that we have left.

This is not an accident.

An Ontario wetland receives little or no protection until the government has gotten around to officially identifying it as "provincially significant." The evaluation process is slow, inefficient, and has a 260-year backlog, creating uncertainty for farmers and developers and constant wetland loss. Instead, all remaining wetlands should be protected – presumed significant – until proven otherwise. And then the protection should be real.

Healthy trees and forests are equally important for healthy communities. They filter our air, absorb stormwater, moderate air temperature and protect

against drought. They are habitat for wildlife, and they absorb carbon emissions that cause climate change.

Southern Ontario was once covered with woodlands.

But now, most of southern Ontario has below the 30% minimum forest cover needed to keep the ecosystems that sustain us just barely functioning.

The average stands at 25%, and some parts of Ontario have much less.

The loss of wetlands and woodlands is particularly extreme in southwestern Ontario.

Essex County, for example, has just 3% forest cover and 1.5% wetlands to hold back heavy rains. Flooding in Windsor should come as no surprise.

The St. Clair Conservation watershed has only 10% forest and only a tenth of one per cent wetland. Without these important buffers, farmers are losing soil and nutrients to erosion.

This washes more phosphorus into the river, feeding algae growth in Lake Erie.

Land in southern Ontario has been under extreme pressure from development and agriculture for some time. And property owners have little economic incentive to preserve these vital natural spaces.

Provincial policies for protecting both wetlands and woodlands are simply not up to the job of meeting this pressure.

But there are sensible solutions that can provide what's needed.

Farmers and other landowners are more likely to choose conservation when it makes financial sense. And property owners who commit to protecting woodlands should not be overburdened by paperwork.

We all benefit from wetlands and woodlands, so it is not fair to leave property owners with all the costs. The government should encourage property owners to protect these areas by increasing tax relief and reducing red tape.

Volume 4 - Wildlife and wilderness

Diseases can decimate wildlife, and Ontario is already seeing threats we can't ignore.

For example:

- Four of Ontario's eight native bat species face extinction from white-nose syndrome and
- Deer suffering from chronic wasting disease, similar to mad cow, are now on Ontario's doorstep.

Wildlife disease can also impact human health. Over 60% of existing diseases, and at least 75% of emerging diseases, have animal origins: avian flu, SARS, rabies and Lyme disease to name a few.

These diseases can have severe economic impacts. It will take a high level of vigilance to keep them at bay.

Ontario collects a lot of data about biodiversity – but we need to connect the dots. Ontario needs to see the big picture so that conservation work can be the most effective. Instead, information is not shared well, and coordination is lacking.

Meanwhile, Ontario shows too little respect and support for the wildlife and wilderness conservation work done by dedicated volunteers and non-profit organizations such as the Ontario Biodiversity Council.

The government leans heavily on their valuable work to justify underfunding its own, but has not reciprocated with the modest, long-term funding commitments they need.

Small but consistent investments in such organizations could be highly cost-effective, and yield big returns.

Conclusion

The failures described in this report are neither inevitable nor necessary. Small changes can better protect Ontario's water, wetlands, woodlands and wildlife. My report offers sensible solutions. Many cost relatively little and would yield big rewards.

The Ontario government has the primary responsibility to preserve the natural environment upon which our lives depend.

- It should do more to protect Ontario's water.

- Commit to long-term funding to protect Ontario's source protection program.
 - Require municipalities to do everything practicable to stop overflowing raw sewage into our lakes and rivers.
 - Review outdated industrial toxic waste standards and
 - Limit pollution from agricultural runoff and road salt.
- Our wetlands and woodlands are too valuable and now too scarce to lose.
 - Give them strong, immediate legal protection and
 - Encourage farmers and property owners to protect them with more tax relief and less red tape.
 - Government must be vigilant in monitoring Ontario's biodiversity.
 - Connect the dots and
 - Provide stable support for the Ontario Biodiversity Council.

Honouring Ontarians' environmental rights can help make a real difference. Ontarians have the right, and the tools, to help protect our environment.

We are lucky to live in this beautiful province. If we want it to stay that way, we have to look after it.

Thank you, merci.