



Ontario government must tackle pollution affecting Indigenous communities

Environmental Commissioner also calls on the province to better protect threatened species and fight algae in Ontario's lakes

Toronto, October 24, 2017 – The Environmental Commissioner of Ontario (ECO), Dianne Saxe, today called on the provincial government to make environmental justice part of its reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. From species at risk, to algae, to environmental rights, her annual Environmental Protection Report, *Good Choices, Bad Choices: Environmental Rights and Environmental Protection in Ontario*, highlights both environmental successes and failures.

“The Ontario government has long turned a blind eye to pollution that adversely affects many Indigenous communities,” stated the Commissioner. For over 60 years, the Grassy Narrows and Wabaseemoong First Nations, northwest of Dryden, have suffered devastating effects from mercury poisoning. The people of Aamjiwnaang First Nation continue to breathe air that is heavily polluted by the industrial facilities of “Chemical Valley” in Sarnia, contributing to serious health and environmental problems. Dozens of First Nation communities in Ontario lack access to safe drinking water. At the ECO’s last count, 36 First Nation communities are affected by a drinking-water advisory that’s been in place for more than a year, many being in place for over a decade.

“The conditions faced by these Indigenous communities would not be tolerated elsewhere in Ontario, yet have long been deemed unworthy of priority, effort or expense,” Saxe observed. “After decades of neglect, the province is finally taking some steps, but the pollution that these communities still face is outrageous.”

The Commissioner’s report highlights how the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR) is failing to protect species at risk, like the Algonquin wolf. “It’s illegal to kill threatened species in Ontario, but the MNR has decided to strip the Algonquin wolf of this protection in much of its habitat,” said Saxe. “There may be as few as 250 mature Algonquin wolves in the wild, and hunting and trapping are major threats to their survival. The Algonquin wolf stands little chance without full protection.”

Good Choices, Bad Choices also reports on how two ministries overhauled their permitting processes with very different outcomes. The Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change (MOECC) simplified its approvals process by shifting some low-risk activities from individualized permits to pollute to standard rules. The MOECC’s permitting system has successfully brought many previously unregulated facilities under consistent, up-to-date environmental standards, while also improving compliance. In

stark contrast, the MNR's permitting system under the *Endangered Species Act* is a failure; the MNR's simplified approvals system generally lowers the standard of protection for species at risk, with little to no transparency, oversight or enforcement. In addition, in the almost 3,000 applications submitted since the act was passed, the MNR has never turned down a single permit to harm or kill a species at risk.

Toxic algae is a growing threat to Ontario's lakes. Thick scums of algae can make lakes dangerous for swimming, drinking and fishing. Phosphorus is a major cause of algae growth. Yet the province relies almost exclusively on voluntary and unevaluated phosphorus control programs that have not worked. "The provincial government must tackle non-point sources of phosphorus, namely contaminated water from farms, streets and lawns. To start, the government should ban all spreading of phosphorus sources, including manure, fertilizer and sewage sludge, on frozen or saturated ground."

Other topics covered in the report include: report cards on the government's compliance with the *Environmental Bill of Rights*, showing improvements due to outreach by the Commissioner's office; implications of changes to the *Aggregate Resources Act*; and the 68,000 km² shortfall in Ontario's protected area system that is required to meet the national 17% target by 2020.

Good Choices, Bad Choices: Environmental Rights and Environment Protection in Ontario can be downloaded 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.*