



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In 2017-2018, raw sewage overflowed into southern Ontario waters 1,327 times – 766 of these from 57 outdated municipal sewer systems that combine sewage with stormwater.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that provincial standards for industrial toxic wastes poured into our waterways are now 25 years old, and are likely outdated.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