



Ontario giving polluters free ride

Lacks the staff to enforce laws

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Budget cuts and staff reductions at two provincial government ministries are having a "crippling" effect on the fight to protect the environment, a scathing new report says.

Ontario environmental commissioner Gord Miller issued a "special" report yesterday on the ministries of the environment and natural resources and concluded that:

- Industries spew more pollutants into Ontario's air than current standards allow simply because the government doesn't have the staff to review the files.
- Raw and inadequately treated sewage pollutes bodies of water throughout the province because there aren't enough people to regulate treatment plants.
- Wildlife conservation officers are increasingly unable to leave the office because their gasoline budgets are so low, prompting groups in the North to hold fundraising bake sales for them.

In the last 15 years, governments of all three parties have cut funding to the environment and natural resources ministries so that now they can't keep track of the state of the environment, let alone anticipate catastrophe, Miller said.

"Our emergency wards clog with children having asthma attacks. But the solution is not just more emergency wards; it includes giving (the environment ministry) the resources to make the air cleaner," he said. "The same is true for cancer. With a significant portion of cancers being environmentally induced, why aren't we giving these ministries the resources to develop better standards and empower them to detect and reduce carcinogens in the environment?"

Miller's report, *Doing Less with Less*, shows Ontario's spending on environmental protection has declined, on a per person basis, to \$22 this year from \$39 in 1992. Spending on natural resource management declined to \$49 per person from \$72.

Miller lays the responsibility for the underfunding on the present Liberal government and past Conservative and NDP governments. But, he said, the blame also lies with the public for not forcing politicians to adequately fund the ministries.

The combination of growing environmental concerns and slashed budgets has left the environment and natural resources ministries unable to inspect facilities, enforce existing laws or look ahead to come up with ways to protect Ontarians from new concerns.

The NDP and Conservatives slammed the Liberals for not doing enough. The Liberals countered by saying they've increased both budgets but can't instantly fix a decade of problems left by Conservative and NDP governments.

"We know the (natural resources ministry) budget had been severely cut back by the previous government and I've been working over the years to build it up. We've had a 23 per cent increase, about \$136 million since 2004," Natural Resources Minister David Ramsay said.

Ramsay didn't agree with Miller's assessment that people's health and the province's environment are at risk because of the chronic underfunding.

"We have been doing a good job," Ramsay said.

But Miller cited a program, operating since the 1970s, under which the environment ministry issues certificates of approval to industries, in part outlining what pollutants they can emit.

"We have a huge backlog of tens of thousands of old (certificates of approval) that have to be reviewed and brought up to speed," Miller said, adding the ministry lacks staff to do it.

Lack of staff is also the reason why inspectors aren't updating old certificates of approval for sewage treatment plants or even making sure they follow the rules they are covered by, he said.

Environment Minister Laurel Broten said the province has increased funding to deal with the certificate backlog.

"We have taken very drastic steps to rebuild a ministry that was severely cut by two former governments."