



619 Forest Hill Drive
Kitchener, Ontario
N2N 1A1
info@gren.ca
519-744-7503

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GREN Presentation to Ontario People's Budget meeting

On behalf of the Grand River Environment Network, thank you for this opportunity to contribute.

We are only as healthy as our environment. Budget cuts to government bodies entrusted to protect our environment have both immediate and long-term negative impacts that can be permanent and costly. What is happening in Ontario?

Budget Cuts

In 2007, Gord Miller, Environmental Commissioner of Ontario, submitted to the Ontario Legislature that budget shortfalls, staffing cuts and reductions in in-house expertise are “hampering the effectiveness of the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Natural Resources”.ⁱ

He noted that the MOE's budget has been eroded since 1992, reaching its lowest point in 1997/98 and 1998/99. Although it did recover somewhat, the bulk of that was in response to the Walkerton tragedy and, after adjusting for inflation, in 2006/07 it was actually still 34% lower than in 1992/93.

The MNR budget reflects the same downward trend—it was 18% lower in real terms in the same time period. And just last year, the Minister of Natural Resources announced a 10% cut to MNR spending over the next three years.ⁱⁱ

The result of this chronic underfunding is that, “Restructuring and reprioritizing exercises have resulted in core activities being outsourced, specialists becoming generalists and experienced staff, including scientists, being cut.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Lack of Enforcement

Another casualty of budget cuts, despite an impressive list of laws written to protect our environment, is enforcement of those laws. Again, Gord Miller reports that, “MOE staff are able to inspect only about two to four per cent of all regulated facilities per year, so many facilities may go decades without seeing an inspector. Targeted inspection sweeps by MOE have found extremely high rates of non-compliance across most sectors.”^{iv}

Reliance on Citizens

These cuts and lack of enforcement have resulted in a reliance on volunteers in the community. A few local examples are:

- The remediation of Elmira's contaminated groundwater by Chemtura (formerly Uniroyal), mandated by the MOE, lacks the necessary MOE staff to monitor and respond to issues in a timely manner, requiring community volunteers to review monthly, annual and occasional reports from the company and to alert the MOE to issues as they arise;

- The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) cutting the Waterloo Stewardship Network (WSN). Volunteer-initiated projects such as tree planting, erosion control along Canagagigue Creek and re-establishment of the native plant garden at the Elmira public library were all supported by funds, expertise, contacts and organizational help from the WSN. All projects were carried out by and continue to be maintained by community volunteers, so the MNR's assistance paid off exponentially in terms of free labour and improvements to the natural environment.
- Inadequate protection of threatened and/or endangered species, such as the Jefferson Salamander, on the west side lands in Waterloo and the Hidden Valley area of Kitchener. Despite the best efforts of individuals and area naturalist groups, development continues to supersede habitat protection to protect those species.

Residents often have valuable information and ideas that can help government programs and initiatives be effective, more sophisticated, less costly, and address the longer-range timelines that are important for environmental legislation. However, there are inadequate opportunities for presenting this wisdom and information, particularly at the early stages of decision-making. We strongly urge the People's Budget to press for improved public consultation and increased government accountability.

Aggregate Development

North Dumfries Township now has the second highest concentration of gravel pits, both in operation and planned, in Canada. We have strong concerns for the viability of the agricultural base of North Dumfries and the Region of Waterloo as a whole. In addition, the Region of Waterloo is the largest municipality in Canada that depends on ground water for its domestic water supply. The Aggregate Act needs to be revised to allow special municipal considerations and regulations for the additional safeguards that groundwater needs in such circumstances. The Aggregate Act needs a thorough review to take it out of the dinosaur age and put it on an accountable, modern, and environmentally- and ecologically sound footing.

Again, the Grand River Environmental Network appreciates this opportunity to share our concerns.

Presented by:
 Greg Michalenko
 Executive Member
 Grand River Environmental Network

ⁱ http://www.eco.on.ca/index.php?page=doing-less-with-less&hl=en_US

ⁱⁱ http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2012/06/28/ministry_of_natural_resources_job_cuts_office_closures_coming_province_says.html

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.eco.on.ca/index.php?page=doing-less-with-less&hl=en_US

^{iv} http://www.eco.on.ca/index.php?page=moe-s-inspections-programs&hl=en_US