

Report warns local lakes susceptible to algal blooms

By Nate Smelle

Algonquin Negotiations Representative, Stephen Hunter sees the environmental commissioner of Ontario, Dianne Saxe's annual report, "Good choices, bad choices: Environmental rights and environmental protection in Ontario," as a step in the right direction. The report focuses heavily on government inaction regarding water and air quality, species-at-risk, toxic algae and regulating industry – especially when it comes to the impact these environmental injustices have on First Nations.

By calling on the government to make environmental justice part of its strategy for reconciliation, he said Saxe is acknowledging the unjust policies of the past and the deep negative impacts those policies have placed on Indigenous communities.

"Indigenous people in this country have a deep connection to the land and an inherent sense of our responsibility to steward," said Hunter.

"The lack of environmental concern so often shown by our government is a great source of the pain and helplessness our people have so long felt. We must hope that through these conversations all people will benefit. To incorporate our cultural values into the policies and practices of the future will help to provide a healthy environment for future generations."

The commissioner dedicates an entire chapter of her report to the increased frequency and spread of algal blooms throughout the province. Research has shown that these thick, soupy scums of algae are imposing serious costs on Ontario communities by disrupting lake ecosystems, affecting drinking water supplies, and making water unusable for recreation. Although the problem is most common in Lake Erie, Saxe indicated that algal blooms are affecting Lake Simcoe, parts of Lakes Huron and Ontario, as well as inland lakes – three of which are in Algonquin Park. Bodies of freshwater on the Canadian Shield are especially susceptible to these blooms, noted Saxe. The report identifies an over-abundance of phosphorus as the primary cause of algae growth. It also reveals that over the past three decades the problem with algal blooms has worsened.

"We know that in the rivers and creeks in Ontario the phosphorus levels are just as high or higher than they were 30 years ago," Saxe said.

"We also know that the agricultural soil is poorer than it was 30 years ago. We lost roughly 30 per cent of organic carbon content, which makes the soil more likely to erode and make it more likely for phosphorus to get into the water. Finally, we know that there has been a huge upsurge in farmers putting fertilizer, manure and sewage sludge on the land when it's frozen – outside the growing season, when a very high percentage of that washes into the rivers and lakes. So, we recommended that that should be illegal."

Referencing how regulations on phosphorus releases played a key role in cleaning up algal blooms in Lake Erie during the 1970s, Saxe believes more phosphorus controls are needed. Until now, she said the Ontario government has only addressed these sources through voluntary and unevaluated programs. Though Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change (MOECC) have put a lot of pressure on sewage treatment plants, which were a major source of phosphorus 40 years ago, Saxe explained that the biggest sources of phosphorus these days are from agriculture and runoff from rural and urban land.

"The real focus needs to be on surface runoff, both urban and rural," she said.

"What the government has done, is they've spent over \$100 million on environmental farm plans, but again there's been absolutely no monitoring and enforcement. Although it gives lots of money out they haven't checked to be sure that any of the work promised has been done. They haven't checked to see whether the runoff has actually improved."

The commissioner said the government also needs to start paying attention to runoff from golf courses – of which Bancroft has two – and storm water ponds. Each of these are significant sources of phosphorus, she said, that are much cheaper to fix than sewage treatment plants.

"Our government needs to get serious, they need metrics," said Saxe.

"We suggested that they provide incentives to farmers, but instead of just money with no strings it should be tied to verified reductions. The government has to do more than just wish. They have to actually regulate and make sure we're getting the results we need, because we've tried 30 years of the other way and it just doesn't work."

Saxe is calling on the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and the MOECC apply effective financial, regulatory and land use planning tools to curb "non-point" sources of phosphorus runoff. Some of the commissioner's other recommendations include: reforming land use policy to reverse the continuing loss of wetlands in southern Ontario; and enabling phosphorus emitters, like sewage treatment plants, to pay other emitters, like farmers, to reduce their emissions more cheaply.