

Environmental
Commissioner
of Ontario



Commissaire à
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MOE, MNR starved of funding for core functions

Sudbury

Under successive governments since the early 1990s, the two Ontario ministries that bear the main burdens for environmental protection have suffered a gradual but steady erosion of funding, staffing and expertise. As a result, the ministries of Environment and Natural Resources are faltering in a number of core functions such as inspection, compliance, enforcement and monitoring. These are the findings of a Special Report submitted to the Legislature today by Ontario's Environmental Commissioner, Gord Miller.

"At a time of unprecedented public concern for the health of the planet, Ontarians may find it hard to believe that these two ministries are today struggling with fewer resources than in the early 1990s, but that is unfortunately the case," commented Miller. "These declines have occurred under governments formed by all three major political parties in Ontario."

The Special Report notes that operational budgets of MOE and MNR have declined significantly since 1992, in real inflation-adjusted terms. Over the same time period, the mandates of the ministries have steadily expanded, with many new environmental laws requiring enforcement and with environmental issues becoming much more complex. The regulated communities have also grown in number, with many more facilities needing approvals and inspections. As Miller noted, "The ministries have tried to cope through repeated restructuring and reprioritizing exercises to stretch resources ever more thinly, to download and offload some activities, and to discontinue others."

The implications for the environment – as illustrated by numerous examples and case studies in the Report – are real and wide-ranging. They include far too few regular inspections of facilities that discharge pollutants to air and water, chronic compliance problems at sand and gravel operations, neglected provincial parks, inadequate monitoring of wildlife and sport fisheries and weak oversight of municipal sewage infrastructure

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Since the early 1990s, MNR and MOE together have received less and less of the overall operating budget of the Ontario government. "Most large-scale spending decisions are set by the Finance Minister during the budget process, and ministries like MOE and MNR simply have to manage somehow within their assigned budget envelopes," commented Miller. "I think such a top-down directive needs to be better informed by an analysis of the funding and support the ministries need to be effective stewards of our environment and natural heritage." Currently, the operating budgets of MNR and MOE together amount to just barely one per cent of the provincial operating budget. Miller also pointed out that Alberta and B.C. both allocate a bigger share of their overall budgets towards their environmental ministries.

The operating budgets of MOE and MNR have also not kept pace with Ontario's growth, the Commissioner's report noted. Development brings with it ever-increasing pressures on the province's natural resources, through increasing water use, increasing air emissions and a multitude of other development pressures on natural ecosystems. Although pressure on ecosystems has been growing, Ontario's spending on environmental protection has declined on a per person basis; for example, MOE spent \$39 per person in 1992/1993 and in 2006/2007 spent about \$22 per person. MNR spent \$72 per person in 1992/1993 and in 2006/2007 spent about \$49 per person.

The Commissioner is urging the Ontario Government to undertake a step-wise, strategic rebuilding of capacity at MOE and MNR, to ensure that the ministries can fulfill their mandates.

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