



December 12, 2007

Province praised for Lake Simcoe plans

By Chris Simon

Local environmental groups have praised the Ontario government's latest steps towards the clean-up of Lake Simcoe.

Last week, the province announced immediate plans to address municipal and industrial sewage discharge limits, and create stronger requirements for stormwater facilities. The government pledged \$850,000 to support information sharing and research into reduced phosphorous discharges from urban and agricultural sources.

The funding will also be used to promote the reduction of phosphorous levels among residents.

"The people and communities around (the) lake know that we must begin living in harmony with (it) and working toward sustainable communities in order to protect it for generations to come," said environment minister John Gerretsen. "Our government is committed to a long term protection strategy for the lake; one that sees everyone doing their part and by lowering the amount of phosphorus going into the lake. In the meantime, we are acting immediately where we can to hold the line on phosphorus."

As part of the plan, the government also promised several measures for the development of the proposed Lake Simcoe Protection Act, including the creation of science and stakeholder advisory committees, consultation with communities regarding the agricultural, environmental, tourism and developmental aspects of the watershed, and the release of a discussion paper on the matter. First Nations communities will also be consulted, according to Gerretsen.

Once implemented, the act is expected to improve sewage treatment standards and set strict limits for pollutants. And several local groups say the plan will benefit area residents and the environment.

"This is a positive first step in the effort to save the lake; it's now possible to at least imagine (it) returning to its natural state," said Rick Smith, executive director of Environmental Defence, an advocacy group involved with lake clean-up efforts.

"This regulation is not a substitute for the strongest possible Lake Simcoe Protection Act, but needs to be seen as a cornerstone for such an effort."

Others say the plan is one of the first serious commitments from the provincial government regarding the longterm health of the lake. Earlier this year, Premier Dalton McGuinty promised to develop the act.

"It's amazing. They listened, and once they recognized how great the problem is, they acted rather than doing another study," said Ladies of the Lake co-founder Jane Meredith. "They laid out a plan to deliver on McGuinty's promise in July, and they also took some immediate steps."

Ladies co-founder Annabel Slight also stressed the important role local residents should take when cleaning up the lake.

"Every one of us in the Lake Simcoe watershed - from Aurora to Orillia, from Uxbridge to Barrie - has a responsibility to help this beautiful and historic lake, and to stop harming it," she said. "This is no longer just a job for scientists and government behind closed doors. We are all learning about the multitude of problems the lake has and what we all must do."

Lake Simcoe is the largest inland lake in southern Ontario. It provides drinking water for a number of communities, is an agricultural resource, and a tourist destination. While it does not impact drinking water quality, phosphorus from both urban and rural sources lowers oxygen levels in the water, threatening fish in the lake, said Gerretsen.

"It's a busy schedule, we'll be drawing on experts from all communities around the lake, including farmers, business people, environmentalists, First Nations, scientists, citizen groups," said Gerretsen. "There is a great deal of interest in protecting the lake and a lot of ideas about the best ways to do this, we want to hear them to make sure that we get our protection strategy right."