

# Reflections



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In 2021 and in the years to come, it will be important to move past the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic toward economic recovery. However, economic recovery is about people, and we must not lose sight that our environment is the place we live. It is the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land we live on—where our children play and our food is grown.

Consequently, environmental awareness is an important part of our lives. The environment is key to sustaining a healthy economy by providing resources for economic growth and the means to effectively address and respond to natural hazards.

Conversely, if activities are not in place to maintain or restore the quality of the environment, environmental degradation can negatively impact, for example, human health, agriculture and biodiversity, and can contribute to climate change, removal of green cover, loss of landfill capacity, and an increase in the number of species at risk.

This year's *Annual Report of Environmental Audits* highlights many key risks to further degradation of the environment in Ontario, including:

- In the absence of substantive actions, the number of species at risk in Ontario will continue to grow,

and the condition of species and their habitats will continue to decline. In its responses to our audit recommendations on our report titled “Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk,” the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (Environment Ministry) confirmed its lack of commitment to improve transparency, and its programs and processes to protect species at risk.

- Unless additional initiatives are undertaken to reduce and divert non-hazardous waste from landfills, Ontario’s existing landfills will be at capacity within the next 11 to 14 years.
- Between 2016 and 2020, there were over 40,000 reported spills in Ontario, over 90% of which were assessed by the Environment Ministry as having the risk of potentially negative impacts on human health and/or the environment. The Environment Ministry’s hazardous spill enforcement regime is not strong enough to bring entities into compliance in a timely manner or deter repeat violations.
- The Environment Ministry does not demonstrate, through leadership and actions, a commitment to upholding the *Environmental Bill of Rights, 1993* (EBR Act). Further, the EBR Act does not cover all environmentally significant ministry actions.

As we noted above, environmental awareness is important and transparency is a key pillar in government accountability. Related to this point, we noted the following:

- More than 20 years ago, our Office reported that the many ministry reports on the environment did not allow the public to evaluate the overall state of the environment. Little has changed since then. Currently, some ministries publish reports on some environmental topics. However, the province still does not provide state of the environment reporting to Ontarians, and a number of legislated deadlines for issuing already required environmental reports are being missed.

- The Environment Ministry has not regularly reported its progress in meeting waste diversion targets or the outcomes of actions to meet greenhouse gas emissions targets. Likewise, the Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry does not release regular reports on progress conserving wetlands or adapting to climate change, nor has it attempted to assess the health of wild pollinator communities, despite their vital role for crop health and wild plant diversity. The province continues to regularly report on air quality, forests and protected areas. However, the Environment Ministry has stopped regularly reporting on the overall state of water quality in the province, when previously it had published comprehensive and accessible *Water Quality in Ontario* reports from 2009 and 2016.
- The Environment Ministry is required under the EBR Act to provide educational programs to Ontarians about their environmental rights under the EBR Act. However, this has not been done.
- There are about 8,000 reported spills per year of hazardous materials such as natural gas, and the likely harms in the short and longer terms remain uncommunicated to the public. The Environment Ministry does not tell Ontarians where a hazardous spill has occurred, who caused the spill, or what specific impacts a spill could have on human health and the environment.

The province's actions, as noted throughout our Report, do not always adhere to the scientific evidence and realities that should be considered when managing legislation and programs on environmental files. These programs need to be based on data and science, with a view to sustainability for future generations.

Based on our *Annual Report of Environment Audits*, we noted that it is important that the province:

- support and work with its environmental legislation rather than against it, strengthen rather than undermine its intents;
- remember sustainability and the longer term when decisions are made. Sound governance and oversight yield decisions that benefit the economy, the environment and society; and
- encourage environmental awareness through better public reporting on the environment—what the province is doing or not doing, and how this is impacting the natural world.

It is well worth remembering that protecting, conserving and restoring the environment requires a longer-term perspective. Whatever the politics of the day, elected governments are called upon to hold this longer-term perspective in sight. The actions they take, or fail to take, will be measured in the long run by future generations of Ontarians.



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