



Reporting on Ontario's Environment 2020/21 Audit

Why We Did This Audit

- State of the environment reporting has been conducted by other jurisdictions for years, publicly sharing information to show the overall environmental state of affairs and changes over time.
- This report is the second stage of our 2020 audit report on setting environmental targets and monitoring the environment.

Why It Matters

- Comprehensive environmental reporting would help decision-makers and the public make more informed decisions about the environment.
- Comprehensive reporting could be produced by a number of ministries with environmental responsibilities.

What we found

No Comprehensive Reporting on Overall State of Ontario's Environment

- While the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (Environment Ministry), the Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry (Natural Resources Ministry) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (Agriculture Ministry) publish reports on some environmental topics (such as air quality, forests and protected areas), there is no regular reporting on the overall state of the environment.
- Canadian and international jurisdictions have regularly reported to the public on the overall state of the environment for years. For example, since 1996, Australia has been commissioning comprehensive, independent reports on the state of Australia's environment for tabling every five years, a requirement contained in legislation.
- More than 20 years ago, our Office noted that the numerous Ministry reports and information sources on the environment did not allow the public to easily and effectively evaluate the overall state of the environment. Nothing has changed since then.

RECOMMENDATIONS 1, 2, 3, 4

No Reporting on Overall State of Ontario's Water Quality

- The Environment Ministry previously released *Water Quality in Ontario* reports between 2009 and 2016, but stopped this comprehensive reporting in 2016.
- Information on the state of Ontario's water quality, including inland lakes, the Great Lakes, streams and groundwater, is now published in a variety of different reports. This makes it harder for the public to access and understand the overall state of Ontario's water.

RECOMMENDATION 5

No Plans to Release Prepared Report on State of Ontario's Natural Resources

- The Natural Resources Ministry does not presently have plans to publicly release a prepared *State of Ontario's Natural Resources Report*.
- The report, which Ministry staff have been working on since 2017, was designed to unify the Ministry's public reporting (including legislated reporting on forests and protected areas) into one easily navigated online report.

- Ministry staff indicated that consolidated reporting would reduce duplication in separate reports, improve consistency in messaging and make it easier for Ontarians to access information on the province's natural resources.
- The prepared report contains information on dozens of indicators, including those related to fisheries, forests, invasive species, ecosystems, and aggregates.
- The Ministry informed us in June 2021 that, without plans to release the report publicly, it will use the *State of Ontario's Natural Resources Report* only as an internal document to inform program and policy decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 6

No Public Reporting on Soil Health, Wild Pollinators or Pesticide Use

- Neither the Agriculture Ministry nor the Natural Resources Ministry reports regularly to the public on the status of wild pollinators. This is because Ontario has no comprehensive, long-term wild pollinator monitoring program to report on.
- There is a gap in provincial reporting on the health of Ontario's agricultural soils. Because the Agriculture Ministry does not have its own soil health monitoring program, it relies on national-scale reporting by the federal government. The Ministry noted that province-wide soil assessment tools are not well developed, and that creating Ontario-specific indicators at different scales would allow for better analysis and reporting, and would be more useful than using only the federal indicators.
- Neither the Agriculture Ministry nor the Environment Ministry collect and report information on the amount, type, timing and location of the application of pesticides to agricultural lands. The Agriculture Ministry stopped conducting voluntary surveys on agricultural pesticide use (collected every five years between 1973 and 2013) due to low response rates.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Incomplete Reporting on Progress

- The three ministries are not explaining to the public what actions they have taken to meet some environmental goals, objectives and targets.
- The Environment Ministry has not reported publicly on Ontario's progress meeting waste diversion targets, or reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to global climate change.
- The Natural Resources Ministry has not released regular reports on progress conserving wetlands, adapting to climate change, preventing the spread of invasive species, or implementing fish and wildlife management strategies.
- The Agriculture Ministry has not reported publicly on progress implementing Ontario's soil health strategy or the former *Pollinator Health Action Plan*.

RECOMMENDATIONS 8, 9, 10

Failing to Meet Public Reporting Deadlines

- We found several cases where ministries are not meeting their legal requirements and policy commitments to report to the public.
- The Environment Ministry is late releasing the 2019 Great Lakes progress report, and has not fulfilled legislated requirements to release 2013, 2014 and 2018 annual reports under the *Lake Simcoe Protection Act, 2008*, or 2018, 2019 and 2020 annual reports under the *Toxics Reduction Act, 2009*.
- Despite a commitment in *A Wetland Conservation Strategy for Ontario: 2017-2030* to initiate public reporting on progress in 2020, the Natural Resources Ministry has not developed a framework for progress reporting and no data has been collected.
- Ministries face no consequences for failing to meet reporting requirements and commitments.

RECOMMENDATION 11

Opportunity to Notify the Public of Environmental Reports

- Under the *Environmental Bill of Rights, 1993*, the Environmental Registry (a website maintained by the Environment Ministry since 1994) is to provide a “means of giving information about the environment to the public.”
- We found that ministries are not fully using this centralized source of public information to notify the public of all their environmental reports.
- Some of the reports that have not been posted include the *Air Quality in Ontario* reports, *Water Quality in Ontario* reports, Minister’s Reports on Toxics Reduction, progress reports on the 2018 *A Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan*, annual reports related to the Provincial Wildlife Population Monitoring Program, and reports related to diseases and pests that affect managed honey bees.

RECOMMENDATIONS 12, 13, 14

Conclusions

- The Province regularly produces reports summarizing information on Ontario’s air quality, forests and protected areas. However, it lacks summarized reporting on other natural resources, water, soil, waste, climate change and wildlife for members of the Legislature and the general public.
- Further, the three ministries are not adequately: reporting to the public on the overall state of the environment and natural resources; providing progress reports on meeting environmental goals and targets; or meeting legislated deadlines and policy commitments for public reporting.

Read the report at www.auditor.on.ca