

REMARKS

Gord Miller, Environmental Commissioner of Ontario

2010/11 Annual Report - "*Engaging Solutions*"

**Legislative Media Studio, Queen's Park
10:00 a.m., Tuesday, November 29, 2011**

Check Against Delivery

The election is over and now we all have to get on with the business of the Province. So I am here to release the first of a series of reports that have been waiting for a Legislature to receive them. Today I am releasing my 2010/2011 Annual Report entitled *Engaging Solutions*. The title arises from a disturbing but increasingly common trend that characterizes the government's response to various environmental problems Ontario is and has been facing. It seems the government is adept at defining environmental problems and even analysing and proposing solutions, but too often they can't seem to get on with implementing solutions. There are many examples of this inaction emerging from the articles in this report but a couple of significant examples make the point.

Perhaps no topic has been more extensively analysed, subjected to consultation, had proposals developed and then re-analysed than solid waste management in this province. The government set a goal of 50% reduction from landfill by 2000 and then fell short of the target. So the target was adjusted to 60% diversion by 2008 and we missed that one too. Presently our diversion rate limps along at about 23%. But it is not because we lack solutions to the problem. Four times over the years the Ministry of the Environment has advanced proposals for a variety of measures for full public consultation. My report lists 19 policy initiatives that have been advanced and debated which would improve the situation. But despite the plethora of policy proposals, there has been no action from government. There is stubborn refusal to engage solutions to the waste management problem.

The behaviour is also evident in the controversial world of the Endangered Species Act. Species-at-risk pose a difficult challenge for our society. Ontarians share a widely held concern for species being extirpated from our province or, worse yet, being lost completely to extinction. And, this is appropriate. But I think we all realize that in some situations protecting species conflicts with important economic and social priorities, and compromises must be made. We passed a new Endangered Species Act in this province which, in a three step process, I believe has the necessary tools and flexibility. First it allows for independent scientists to decide what species are in trouble and then the Act calls for a team of experts to consider what options exist to help the species recover. At the final stage the government considers the social and economic challenges implied by the situation and issues a response document which is intended to lay out what the government will and will not do in response to the risk to the species. In this report I have reviewed the first 13 of these government

response statements and instead of bold and insightful documents which gave clear direction, I found them to be vague and weak responses which made little commitment to government action and were of little use in resolving the conflicts that arise on the landscape when the habitat of endangered species is in play. When it comes to protecting endangered species, the government is refusing to engage solutions.

But some of this government failure can be explained in the context of another matter raised in this Annual Report. You may recall that in 2007 I issued a special report entitled “Doing Less with Less” where I looked at the funding of the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Natural Resources over a number of years with respect to the increasing number of challenges facing those ministries. Those challenges in all areas of natural resources and the environment have increased yet again. So, with yet another round of budget cuts in the works I thought it useful to have another look at the budgets of those ministries. What I found was that in 2010/11 (in constant 2009 dollars) MOE is operating with 45% less money than it was in 1992/93. Over the same period MNR has lost 22% of its budget. Better, but only because the increased fees for parks and hunting and fishing licenses go to a Special Purpose Account where they must be spent on conservation purposes. The combined budgets of these ministries accounted for 2.15% of the operational costs of government in 1992/93 and only 0.76% of the 2010/11 operational expenditures. We don’t even pay one cent of our operational dollar to protect our natural environment.

In my annual reports I sometimes introduce what I call developing issues. These are matters of environmental concern or potential concern that have not yet captured much attention on the public policy agenda. This year I have presented a background piece on the topic of hydraulic fracturing for natural gas extraction from shale and other tight geologic formations, commonly known as “fracking.” We have no commercially proven shale gas in Ontario yet but given the geologic prospects and the recent controversy in Quebec where fracking commenced and was then frozen by a moratorium, I have recommended that the government review and report on the adequacy of the existing regulatory framework to protect the environment in advance of industrial development.

I can take your questions.