

The Ontario Government's Sleight of Hand on Lake Simcoe

By Claire Malcolmson

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Just when it looked like Lake Simcoe was finally getting the protection it needs and that its residents deserve, one hand of government is set to undo a job that another was just getting started on.

On Tuesday, Environment Minister John Wilkinson along with Georgina Mayor Rob Grossi and East Gwillimbury Mayor Virginia Hackson trekked out onto the Lake for some ice-fishing and a photo op to celebrate the release of the Minister's first *Annual Report on the Implementation of the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan*. To be fair, parts of it are worth celebrating. However, planned urban growth may reverse some benefits of the *Lake Simcoe Protection Plan*.

The Annual Report claims success for the development of "...an aggressive strategy to reduce phosphorus in the lake by almost 40 per cent – from 72 tonnes to 44 tonnes per year". What the Annual Report neglects to mention is that achieving the goal will be virtually impossible with planned urban growth. According to a new Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA) study, *Estimation of Phosphorus Loadings to Lake Simcoe – 2010*, the draft and approved Official Plans in Lake Simcoe's watershed could add approximately 14 tonnes per year of phosphorus to the lake. Excess phosphorus causes aquatic plants and algae to grow fast. When the plants die, oxygen in the water is consumed, resulting in oxygen levels that are too low for coldwater fish to survive.

Ministry of Infrastructure's proposed Growth Plan for the Simcoe County area sets the employment and residential population target for Simcoe County at 667,000 people by the year 2031, a significant increase from 437,100 in 2006. To see what effect the proposed Growth Plan for the Simcoe County area will have on phosphorus loading, we broke the LSRCA results down and selected watersheds that are either entirely or partially in Simcoe County. With current development practices, growth from these areas in Simcoe County could add approximately 4.5 tonnes per year of phosphorus to the lake. The same level of growth, if accompanied by some improvements to agricultural practices, could reduce that by a quarter, to 3.2 additional tonnes of phosphorus per year to the lake.

Clearly the numbers from the growth scenarios do not square with the Environment Minister's plan to reduce the phosphorus load to the lake – they increase the load. Unless development practices change immediately, and result in a net reduction in phosphorus loads to the lake, the development proposed by the Ministry of Infrastructure in the Growth Plan will undermine the Ministry of Environment's *Lake Simcoe Protection Act* and Plan.

Some smart alternatives would be for the Growth Plan's population allocations to only permit development that will not result in an increase in phosphorus to Lake Simcoe. To do this, the province could introduce a sustainable community design, water and wastewater management, and green building standard against which new development can be assessed.

What is clear is that the Ontario Government can't have it both ways using today's development practices. Either we have the Ministry of Infrastructure's plan for sprawl, or we have the Minister of Environment's plan for a healthy Lake Simcoe. Right now, residents watch as the best laid plans of one ministry are undone by the careless planning of another.

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