

RENEWING THE MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Submission by
the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
to the Walkerton Inquiry,
The Honourable Justice Dennis R. O'Connor, Commissioner



On behalf of its members employed
at the Ministry of the Environment
May 1, 2001

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: OPSEU RECOMMENDATIONS TO RENEW THE MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT

This report is the result of a process in which Ministry of the Environment (“the Ministry” or “MOE”) staff described their vision of how to renew the Ministry in order to prevent a repeat of the tragedy that claimed seven lives in Walkerton, Ontario in May 2000 when the town’s water supply was contaminated with E coli.

Ministry staff hope the information outlined in this report will be of assistance to Justice O’Connor when he writes his final report.

The Ministry’s Key Strengths and Weaknesses

Ministry staff participated in six workshops held by OPSEU in February and March 2001. Staff discussed the main strengths and weaknesses of the Ministry and made recommendations about how to address the weaknesses.

Strengths

Ministry staff understand that the Ministry’s role is to protect Ontario’s environment. Staff identified as strengths the Ministry’s area, district, and regional offices located across the province, and the laws and regulations that give staff their mandate.

In all six of the workshops, ministry staff stated consistently and powerfully that the main strength of the Ministry of the Environment is its dedicated, experienced and knowledgeable staff. Cutbacks have reduced their numbers by more than 40 per cent but MOE staff remain committed to the cause of protecting Ontario’s environment.

Weaknesses

Ministry staff also described the challenges they face every day. They illustrated the Ministry’s weaknesses by, among many other examples, describing how staffing cuts have limited their capacity to protect the environment. They also described how the Ministry squanders resources on avoidable crises because it will not develop preventive, proactive programs.

How stripped of resources is the Ministry? Examples raised at every workshop included: twenty-five-year-old lab equipment, poorly equipped field inspectors, teams that have to rent a truck before they can get to the site of a spill. More fundamentally, members described the loss of ‘human resources’ such as scientific expertise. Experienced staff retire without Ministry plans to transfer their knowledge to other staff or to hire new experts.

Ministry of the Environment staff want the Ontario public to know that the Ministry has been cut past the point where staff can effectively protect the environment. They work hard every day, but every day they know they don't have the resources they need.

Fixing the Weaknesses

This report sets out the following recommendations as the *minimum* requirements for a Ministry of the Environment that properly protects the public interest in a clean and healthy environment and safe drinking water.

These Recommendations recognize two fundamentally crucial elements of a system that protects both the natural water resource and the public drinking water supply:

- a) dedicated, knowledgeable people working with adequate resources to protect water resources and to inspect and enforce the proper maintenance and operation of the collection and delivery system; and
- b) adequate funding to maintain water infrastructure itself.

Ministry staff observe that both a) and b) are of equal importance regardless of how they are listed in the recommendations.

Overarching Recommendation

Ministry staff repeatedly observed that no agency, body or ministry other than the Ministry of the Environment is better situated to lead and take ultimate responsibility for the protection of Ontario's water resources now and in the future. This Ministry role is the overarching requirement for a water management regime that protects the intrinsic value of clean water as a natural resource and preserves the public interest in safe and clean drinking water.

Recommendation One

The Ministry of the Environment must hire sufficient staff to fulfill its mandate to protect the environment.

Recommendation Two

The Ministry of the Environment must enhance the knowledge and practical expertise of existing staff, and recruit additional skilled professionals.

Recommendation Three

The Ministry of the Environment must provide its staff with the necessary practical and legislative tools.

Recommendation Four

The Ministry of the Environment must become proactive, rather than reactive, and make use of staff expertise in policy and planning.

Recommendation Five

The Ministry of the Environment must provide adequately skilled staff and organizational support and ensure funding to build and maintain Ontario's drinking water infrastructure.

Conclusion

The recommendations in this report are offered to the Commission in the spirit of proud service to the public, with the conviction that we must learn from the tragedy and in the hope that we can move forward better prepared to protect the public interest in safe drinking water.