

Gord Miller, Environmental Commissioner of Ontario

Special Report: Ready for Change?

March 7, 2012

REMARKS

Check against delivery

We are now experiencing the climate alterations caused by the cumulative release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Higher temperatures, along with an increase in the frequency and severity of intense weather events such as ice storms, heavy rains, heat waves, droughts and wind storms, are all projected for Ontario. Research co-ordinated by the Applied Research and Development Branch of MNR is providing a much clearer sense of how this climate change is affecting Ontario now and how these impacts will intensify over the next 30 years and beyond. As temperatures increase across the province, warmer climate conditions will expand northward. Not all the indigenous plants and animals traditionally suited for cooler conditions may be capable of adapting to such change. While some species may thrive, others will not, and certain rare or endangered species may be lost altogether. The ecological repercussions and impacts on Ontario's biodiversity are expected to be significant and irreversible.

Mitigation efforts that reduce greenhouse gas releases constitute the first line of defense against these impacts. However, even if we begin to show some successes in that regard, significant damage has already been done; historical emissions already present in the atmosphere will continue to cause a slow and inexorable increase in global temperatures long into the future. Our current provincial and local infrastructure, programs and services were not designed to address these climatic changes nor the ecological disruptions they will produce. From emergency services to water management to forest fire fighting, how will Ontario handle the growing heat and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns?

How will our health care system cope with an expected increase in cases of heat stress, summer asthma and warm-climate diseases, such as Lyme disease, and West Nile virus?

How will our agricultural sector respond to a longer growing season, shifting precipitation patterns and droughts, and the influx of new warm-weather pests and weeds into Ontario?

How will our energy sector meet the heavy demand for summer air conditioning or counter the threat of winter ice storms?

How will our shipping and fisheries sectors cope with the expected one-metre drop in Great Lakes water levels?

How will northern communities maintain winter ice roads, and respond to losses of permafrost, changing surface hydrology, and stresses to the boreal forest and wetlands?

Emission reduction efforts notwithstanding, adaptation strategies must also be developed in order to prepare society, the economy and the natural environment for the unavoidable changes that are predicted. Adaptation cannot stop climate change from happening, but it can help contain the negative impacts.

Last April, the Ministry of the Environment quietly released a response to the need for action on climate change adaptation. It was called “Climate Ready: Ontario’s Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan, 2011-2014” It is an important document with major implications to the future of Ontario. Today I respond to the ministry’s strategy and plan with my own preliminary review. My report to the Legislature considers if we are “Ready for Change?” or not.

Since the release of Climate Ready, I have been encouraged to learn that progress has been made on a number of the action items identified within the strategy. The details regarding the implementation of specific Climate Ready actions will be reviewed in future ECO reports. At this preliminary stage, however, I believe that Climate Ready represents a relatively comprehensive adaptation strategy and could be a successful plan. However, there were some weaknesses:

Climate Ready identifies decisive actions to address adaptation needs in Ontario, but fails to clearly indicate how these will be prioritized for implementation over the four-year timeframe of the strategy.

The strategy correctly identifies that adaptation initiatives are required across the mandates of many government ministries but it doesn't outline specific responsibilities for key ministries like Energy, Economic Development or Northern Development and Mines.

The strategy contains few quantitative or qualitative targets or specific timelines for delivery.

And, the Ministry of the Environment did not post this obviously significant environment policy document on the EBR Registry as a proposal, as is required by law, thereby denying the public the right to comment on its suitability and adequacy.

My report lays out how I will evaluate the government's progress in implementing this adaptation plan over the coming months. In these times, funding adaptation initiatives will clearly be a challenge. Some actions can be achieved within existing expenditure envelopes; others will clearly require new investments. But as the *Stern Report* economic analysis established, what we don't spend on adaptation now will cost us much more in the future.