

**GUELPH MERCURY** (Oct 4, 2006)

## **Gravel pit operators taken to task**

GREG MERCER

A flight over the countryside south of Guelph will show gravel companies aren't following laws requiring them to rehabilitate land after they use it, says Ontario's Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller.

Miller released his annual report on the environment yesterday, and in it takes aim at an industry he said has done a poor job of regulating itself.

He said the gravel sector's rate of rehabilitating land is "unacceptably low," government enforcement is poor and the environment is not adequately protected by existing laws.

Including new staff hired by the Ministry of Natural Resources, government inspectors in Ontario are required to police more than 600 gravel pits and quarries each, Miller said.

Among other things, they're responsible for making sure companies protect wetland and wood lots and don't dig deeper, operate longer each day or operate louder than they're permitted to.

The government is simply undermanned for the task, the commissioner said.

These concerns are part of the message Miller will take to a public meeting at the Puslinch Community Centre in Aberfoyle, in the heart of Wellington County's unofficial gravel capital, on Oct. 17.

Miller said the clash between citizens and the gravel industry will grow as southern Ontario continues to develop more residential lands and the space for new pits run out.

The landscape is reaching its "carrying capacity," he said, and the laws governing the public's input around gravel pits need to be changed.

"Beyond the initial application process, there doesn't seem to be a way for regular citizens to get their concerns heard and addressed," he said.

"Puslinch Township, if you fly over it, you notice some land is not being rehabilitated progressively. Clearly, on the face of it, there seems to be a problem. And one would think citizen's concerns could be heard and dealt with quite readily, but unfortunately that's not the case."

Of the average 1,056 hectares of land that are disturbed annually in Ontario by gravel pits, only 461 hectares are rehabilitated each year, according to Miller's report.

But those statistics are misleading, said Malcolm Matheson. He's chair of the regional branch of the Ontario Stone, Sand and Gravel Association, an industry group.

Matheson said what isn't factored into figures around rehabilitation is flooding that occurs in gravel pits. That land should be counted as unavailable for rehabilitation, he said.

"What the statistics don't show is that there are areas in a lot of pits and quarries that we can't claim for rehabilitation because they're below water," he said.

The industry has a good record of returning the land it uses to its natural state, Matheson argues. In some cases, the land is left in a better state than it was in originally, he said.

He points out that the Arboretum in Guelph was a gravel pit before it was restored.

He said the gravel industry is already heavily regulated and there's ample opportunity within existing legislation for citizens to have a say. And he doubts companies are intentionally flouting any laws.

Because government is the biggest consumer of gravel, namely in the form of highways and other public infrastructure, taxpayers in southern Ontario save money because gravel dug locally doesn't have to be trucked long distances, Matheson said.

And by relying on gravel pits that are closer to buyers, less greenhouse gases are burned transporting the material down the highway, he said. There is also less wear and tear on the roads, he said.

The frustration facing companies is that some citizens will never be satisfied with the way gravel pits are operated, he said.

"The problem with citizens in the world these days is we've gone from 'not in my backyard' to 'nothing in my backyard' to what we call the nopes: 'not on planet earth,'" Matheson said.

"But nothing gets built without us. You can't build a factory, a street, a hospital, a bridge. So where's it come from?"

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