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Quarries not committed to rehab, says Gravel Watch

BY DON REDMOND

The president of Gravel Watch Ontario warns that many quarry companies are doing little or nothing when it comes to rehabilitating their abandoned pits.

Ric Holt, Gravel Watch president, told the Compass that while quarry rehabilitation was once carefully monitored by the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), which went as far as collecting security deposits from the companies, that is no longer the case.

Reacting to a billboard campaign presently underway by the Ontario Sand, Stone and Gravel Association (OSSGA) that he believes paints a far-too-rosy picture of quarry rehabilitation, Holt said the reality is somewhat different.

"The industry wants people to feel good about rehabilitation but my feeling is this campaign doesn't correlate with actual facts," said Holt, a computer science professor at the University of Waterloo. "The billboards being put up by OSSGA seem to suggest that pits and quarries are generally turn into something beautiful, like a vineyard. However, this is not what usually has happened."

Holt traces questionable issues of successful rehabilitation back to 1997 when OSSGA (then known as the Aggregate Producers Association of Ontario) were told by the MNR that they were "effectively self-policing, in charge of themselves" when it came to spent quarries. To that end, Holt said the MNR handed back \$48 million in security deposits and instructed a group called the Ontario Aggregate Resource Corporation to redistribute the monies back to the quarry companies.

"That wasn't too difficult," Holt claimed, "since the sole shareholder in the Ontario Aggregate Resource Corporation was the Aggregate Producers Association of Ontario. The government, in essence, handed them back their deposits, told them to liquidate it and said from that point on, they were self-policing."

Holt was quick not to paint all industry giants with the same brush, saying that while "some pits have done an excellent job of rehabilitation, the bigger picture is bleak. Ontario law requires progressive rehabilitation, but the official statistics suggest that only about half of disturbed land in these pits and quarries is actually being cleaned up.

So if it's Ontario law, why isn't rehabilitation happening regularly, Holt was asked. "Because the honour system doesn't always work," he quipped, adding, "when the MNR removes the security deposits, they also removed the incentive (to rehabilitate.)"

However, there was an easier way to skirt the law, he added. "Typically, what happens is that pits and quarries never declare that they are closing, and so they can defer rehab indefinitely." Only stricter monitoring and the threat of fines by the MNR would get rehabilitation back up to the levels it was at prior to 1997, he added.

Agreeing with Holt was Gord Miller, the Environment Commissioner of Ontario, who said in his annual report in December, "Regulators and the industry have long recognized that aggregate operators should not leave an ever-growing legacy of abandoned pits and quarries on the landscape. But worked-out pits and quarries are far more than mere eyesores; they provide little natural habitat, regenerate only very slowly, and can be prone to serious erosion."

Holt added his group pressured the MNR to review the situation in January 2004. Two and a half years later, he said the MNR responded to Gravel Watch in August 2006, suggesting themselves that "it is apparent that a significant component of the aggregate industry is not making sufficient efforts to rehabilitate their aggregate sites..."

"So the MNR finally acknowledged that, yeah, things are not great," said Holt. "We say it's been 10 years since the companies got their security deposits handed back to them. Happy anniversary - it didn't work. Can we now go back to the old systems of security deposits and monitoring?"