

MOE alerted to potential water problems at quarry

Dianne Cornish

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In an unprecedented move, the City of Hamilton's Public Health Services (PHS) has drafted a letter to the Ontario Ministry of the Environment (MOE), warning of potential health problems should the Ministry grant unconditionally St. Marys Cement a Permit to Take Water (PTTW).

The four-page letter warns that an approved permit, needed to allow the aggregate company to test an unproven groundwater recirculation system for its proposed quarry in northeastern Flamborough, has the potential to cause a public health concern "in the form of groundwater shortages or groundwater contamination."

St. Marys applied to the MOE for a temporary PTTW last fall. The permit, if granted, will allow the company to take water from the aquifer at a rate of 8,800 litres per minute, 24 hours per day (for a total of 12,700,000 litres/2,800,000 gallons per day) for a period of 20 days.

The letter, authored by Eric Mathews, manager of Hamilton's health protection division, was sent October 26 to Paul Odom, the MOE official responsible for deciding whether or not the permit will be approved. Mathews invoked Section 11 of the Health Protection and Promotion Act by relaying his concerns to the MOE.

"Invoking Section 11 is a very rare occurrence," said Mark Rudolph, vice-chair of the anti-quarry group FORCE (Friends of Rural Communities and the Environment). The group found only one other instance when the section was invoked, that being in 1989 at a defunct quarry in the Kingston area where the ground had heaved and a "pop out" occurred, Rudolph added.

The city's action was hailed by FORCE chair Graham Flint. "Protecting our public health and drinking water is the single most important reason why government decision makers at all levels must reject the proposed quarry for the Flamborough area," he said.

St. Marys wants to establish a 340-acre quarry at 11th Concession Road East and the Milborough Line, the boundary that separates Flamborough and Milton. FORCE, a grassroots citizens' group with members from both communities, is opposed to the plan for a number of environmental reasons, including the presence of provincially significant wetlands and significant woodlands on the site that is within the natural heritage system of Ontario's greenbelt. But water source protection has become the overriding concern of residents near the site.

The PHS warning raises concerns about the municipal groundwater based drinking system for the 3,000 residents of Carlisle, the communal well in Stonebrook Estates (a local subdivision), and the many nearby residential wells.

"If the McGuinty government truly believes in all of its clean water initiatives post-Walkerton, this government has a duty to act and to act now," Flint said in a press release.

"Water is at the centre of this issue," Flint told the Review this week. "This thing (the quarry proposal) has the potential to be a risk to public health. It is my understanding that the MOE will not move forward until this potential health risk is resolved."

By issuing the environmental public health warning, Mathews has put the matter into the province's hands.

"It belongs at the province. It's a provincial decision," Flint stressed.

The FORCE chair called on the Ontario government to step in and put an end to the quarry application. Dr. Rick Smith, executive director of Environmental Defence, backed the call to action. "This public health letter is a wake-up call to provincial government decision makers," he said. "This application challenges both the protection of Ontario's greenbelt and implementation of the new Clean Water Act."

The stance taken by FORCE and Environmental Defence is consistent with recommendations in the recently released annual report of Ontario's environmental commissioner Gordon Miller. In it, Miller cited the Flamborough quarry application as an example of the conflict between provincial policies on aggregate extraction and environmental protection and called on the McGuinty government to "reconcile its conflicting policies." The report also says, "Specifically, the province should develop a new mechanism within the ARA (Aggregate Resources Act) approvals process that screens out, at an early stage, proposals conflicting with identified natural heritage or source water protection values."

The Greenbelt Act calls for protection of wetlands, forests and farmland, and the Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan calls for a strategy for wise use and conservation of aggregate, but other policies permit quarries to be located almost anywhere.

"The provincial government needs to step in and reconcile their priorities," Flint said.

"They can't have their cake and eat it, too. It just doesn't work that way."

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