

introduction



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Focus on Our Environment is the second State of the Environment Report for York Region.

York Region's first State of the Environment Report - *Our Environment, Our Home* - was launched in June 2000 in response to an Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care requirement for a report at least once every five years on local environmental risk areas.¹ The State of the Environment 2000 Report (SOE 2000 Report) broke new ground and was the first of its kind for York Region. The development of the Report was led by the Health Services Department with involvement from other Regional Departments and external agencies. Over 70 individuals from provincial ministries, area municipalities, Regional Departments, environmental and community organizations, conservation authorities, universities, and the transportation and energy sectors helped shape the outline of the Report.

The products of the York Region SOE 2000 initiative included a detailed technical report, a summary report document, a natural features map and an educational brochure entitled *An A to Z of Environmental Actions*. The SOE 2000 Report provided data and information on the state of the land, water and air resources of York Region, described the major stresses on those resources, and reviewed selected aspects of the social environment related to environmental health. It also identified 80 benchmarks or indicators of health to be used to track the health of the environment and progress being made to protect it. In addition, the Report contained 24 recommendations for action to protect the environmental resources of York Region. ***The first of those recommendations was to update the State of the Environment Report at regular intervals.***

This SOE Report represents a beginning, and sets a baseline against which progress can be measured. Regular updating is needed to effectively monitor the state of the environment in the Region, trends, and progress towards achieving goals.

Many of these recommendations address Regional initiatives that are already underway.

The SOE Report will help to coordinate and re-focus efforts on these important initiatives.

York Region State of the Environment Report 2000

1.2 PURPOSE of the report

The SOE 2005 Report - *Focus on Our Environment* - fulfils the above Recommendation from 2000. Although it is no longer a Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care requirement to produce a State of the Environment Report, it is good planning practice to do so.

The purpose of this report is to:

- provide an update on the current state of York Region's natural environment;
- describe the progress made on the 24 recommendations contained in the SOE 2000 Report;
- refine the land, water and air indicators used to monitor our environment;
- communicate trends where possible;
- detail the many environmental initiatives undertaken by the Region and its partners from 2000-2005;
- provide recommendations for future action; and
- provide information so that those who live and work in York Region can take responsible actions to protect and restore their natural environment.

As a healthy environment is fundamental to our quality of life, State of the Environment reporting lets us measure the health of the air we breathe, the water we drink and the land that sustains us. It allows us to pinpoint problems and recognize successes. It allows us to know whether things are getting better, or things are getting worse. The information gathered helps us to protect (and restore) our natural resources, including rivers, lakes, wetlands, forests, farmlands, vegetation and wildlife. And it helps us to make better, wiser decisions.





1.3 DEVELOPMENT of the report

Who Took Part

The SOE 2005 Report was developed jointly by the York Region Health Services and Planning and Development Services Departments. Internal Advisory and Working Committees were established to guide the development of the document and to gather information and data. The Committees included representatives from Health Services, Planning and Development Services, Corporate Services, the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer and Transportation and Works.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING AN INDICATOR

- Is it measurable, meaningful and relevant?
- Is data readily available?
- Does it apply on a regional scale?
- Does it give us trend information?
- Will it help us measure progress?
- Will there be a significant gap in knowledge without it?

Extensive consultation with conservation authorities (Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority), provincial ministries (Ministry of Natural Resources, Ministry of the Environment, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food), the nine area municipalities, and the seven municipal Environmental Advisory Committees (EACs) in York Region was carried out to gather advice and information for the SOE 2005 Report. Area municipalities and conservation authorities provided information in many critical areas, and were asked to contribute highlights of their most important environmental initiatives developed since 2000. These are included in section 3.3.

Data and information were also gathered from external organizations including agricultural associations, energy providers and other provincial ministries. Feedback on the draft indicators was obtained from representatives of conservation authorities, municipalities, EACs, and other non-governmental and environmental organizations at a stakeholder consultation session held on May 31, 2005.

Indicator Development

The heart of the SOE 2005 Report is the suite of indicators that are used to assess the current state of York Region's land, water and air resources. The indicator development process began with an extensive literature review of indicators being used elsewhere, including those being developed at a national scale by Environment Canada and the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. The literature review confirmed the soundness of the organizational principle of the SOE 2000 Report, i.e., the evaluation of land, water and air.

Extensive reviews led to an increase in the number of indicators included in the Report (from 80 in 2000 to 85 in 2005) and to refinements to many of the indicators used. In many cases, the refinement of indicators was a result of improved data collection and analysis capabilities, both inside and outside the Region. For example, the improved measures of the health of rivers developed with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority provide more detailed information that will help in future decision-making.

In the State of the Environment reporting process, there is inevitably a tension between the desire to gather as much information as possible, and the need to move forward with a reasonable amount of information. Decisions for inclusions in this Report were based on the principles found in the text box on this page.

In several instances, data and information systems are not yet in place to evaluate important segments of York Region's natural environment. We have indicated in the text where the future development of appropriate indicators is required. It is understood that indicators will continue to be refined over time as information systems improve further.

Products

The *Focus on Our Environment Report* is the most visible product of the SOE 2005 Report project. It is augmented by an updated natural features map and an educational brochure that details how York Region residents can take personal responsibility to protect the health of the environment. The report and educational brochure can be accessed on the Region's website at www.york.ca and are joined there by an interactive suite of maps that highlight the many features of York Region's natural environment. Another important, although less visible, product is the database that has been created to house all SOE measures, targets and status from the original report, with the ability to add status changes up to and including 2005. This forms the beginning of an environmental health indicator database that can be updated over time.

1.4 HEALTH and the environment

Finally, the Report cannot be read without referring to an underlying premise. That is that we cannot have healthy people and healthy communities without also having healthy ecosystems - the ecological model of health. Many people now understand that a wide range of environmental factors - the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink - influence the health of individuals and communities. Increasing numbers of people also understand that natural systems - lakes, rivers, groundwater, forests and wetlands - are as important to our health and our quality of life as the human-made systems that allow us to communicate with one another, fill a glass with clean water, or get to work.

The natural environment is one of many determinants of human health. Others include education, income, family history of health and illness, employment, the location where one lives and personal lifestyle choices. Air pollutants, contaminated private wells, pesticide use and smoking have effects on our health as does our use of cars rather than walking trails, bikes and transit and of elevators rather than stairs.

Globally, our understanding of the potential threats to our health from the environment is increasing; but there is still much to learn. It is recognized that at certain levels of exposure, contaminants in our air, water, food and soil can cause adverse effects, including cancer, birth defects, respiratory illness and gastrointestinal ailments.² We are aware that there are certain segments of the population, especially children and the elderly, who may be more susceptible to adverse health effects from some environmental contaminants or pollutants. People with existing health conditions and those with compromised immune systems may also be at higher risk. Understanding the potential impacts of these contaminants on such groups is important and helps us to gain a fuller picture of what impacts our environment has on human health.

Measures of health status analyzed in conjunction with data regarding our environment's health will help us better understand cause and effect relationships. Ongoing work to find the right measures, collect data that are meaningful and monitor trends over time will greatly contribute to our ability to take action and make informed decisions in the future.

Our understanding of a number of new environmental factors that influence human health is also increasing. These include global climate change, exposure to UV radiation and the introduction of invasive species. These issues are discussed in Chapters 6 and 4 respectively.

Global warming poses risks to health as does exposure to ultraviolet radiation and to air pollution. The exact nature of these risks still remains uncertain. With regard to global climate change, scientists are more confident about their projections for large-scale areas (e.g., global temperature and precipitation change and average sea level rise) and less confident about the ones for small-scale areas (e.g., local temperature and precipitation changes, altered weather patterns, soil moisture changes).³ Despite this uncertainty, now is the time to begin to understand the potential impacts of global warming on our communities and to consider potential adaptation strategies for these impacts.

Much has been said about the negative impacts that destruction of the natural environment can have on our health. We also need to keep in mind the positive effects that our land, water and air have on our physical and mental health - the peace of walking or hiking through a forested area on a sunny fall day; the joy of swimming, fishing, canoeing or sailing during the summer; the pleasure of relaxing in the shade of our trees or gardening; the happiness of watching our children play in the snow, enjoying the changing leaves of fall and seeing the first flowers of the spring.

Our actions have the ability to impact our natural environment and our state of health. Read more about this in Chapter 9.

Let's Focus on Our Environment!

