

Groups team up after fire

Calls grow for stronger laws after Biedermann blaze kills fish in Spencer Creek

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Environment Hamilton and the Bay Area Restoration Council (BARC) want to be sure federal, provincial and local laws are strong enough to prevent another incident such as the Biedermann Packaging fire that flushed poisonous pesticides into Spencer Creek.

Thousands of fish there and in Cootes Paradise died as a result.

The two nonprofit citizens groups are teaming up in the wake of the July 26 Dundas blaze to probe pesticide regulations, obtain water and sediment sampling data from the province, push for restoration of the damaged ecosystem and look at legislation that would ensure the public knows what toxic chemicals are stored or used in their communities.

They are also sending letters to Premier Dalton McGuinty to support Hamilton city council's call for a public inquiry into the fire. The blaze sent contaminated water through a storm sewer into the creek, wiping out big fish, baby fish and many smaller water-dwelling creatures that provide food for fish and birds.

Jim Hudson, executive director of BARC, which is devoted to cleaning up and protecting Hamilton Harbour, said: "This is an important issue. We are a community talking about banning cosmetic use of pesticides and we have a company here, in a very ecologically sensitive area, packaging chemicals that aren't even approved for use in Canada."

Lynda Lukasik, executive director of Environment Hamilton, said: "This experience says to us there is a need to look at whether the regulatory regime is adequate, to make sure another Biedermann-like fire doesn't occur elsewhere.

"The other piece we are working on is the whole question of community right-to-know laws, looking to Toronto where they have a draft bylaw."

Vince Sferrazza, manager of the Environment Ministry's Hamilton district office, said sediment sampling found only tiny amounts of one harmful substance at a couple of spots downstream of the fire.

"We sampled five sites and found only trace amounts -- in parts-per-billion levels -- of diazinon (a weed killer used by farmers and gardeners) at two of the five. It is not a persistent chemical, so we would not expect it to be present and we will do confirmatory sampling. We can't even be sure it was from the douse water."

Sferrazza said ministry staff have met once with representatives of the Ministry of Natural Resources, Hamilton Conservation Authority, City of Hamilton and Royal Botanical Gardens and agreed to work on a restoration action plan for the creek.

David Galbraith, chief scientist at the RBG, said his main concern is "What's the present state of the ecosystem and how can we recover what may have been lost?"

He's worried mainly about the loss of many baby fish and other critters in the creek and, to some extent, the Cootes marsh, which acts as a fish nursery for western Lake Ontario.

"A lot of baby fish from this year were affected. Most adults had migrated after spawning in spring or the adult loss would have been much worse, but I believe it (the contaminated water) had a very damaging effect on baby fish.

"The food web has to be rebuilt. A lot will come back on its own, but this has been a hard year because there's been so little rainfall."

As an example of what may be missing, Galbraith cited mayflies which would have laid eggs that would hatch next year and be an important source of food for fish and birds, "but there may be no eggs."

Biedermann officials did not reply to Spectator calls about how the company is faring after the fire.

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