

How to get the harbour off list of shame

Millions of dollars needed to clean up our pollution hot spot

BY PETER VAN HARTEN

High E.coli counts, closed beaches, stinky algae, oxygen-starved water ...

Fish tumours and deformed birds, industrial waste, oil slicks, toxic sediments and sewage effluent ...

They all keep Hamilton Harbour on the list of Great Lakes pollution hot spots.

That black mark stamped on 41 Canadian and U.S. areas of concern — as they are politely called by the International Joint Commission — has been a stain on Hamilton's image and hurt the city's economic and cultural growth.

Politicians have been working along with community, industrial and environmental groups to get the harbour off the list by 2015.

And the good news is we are more than halfway there.

At one time, it wasn't even thought possible.

But millions of cleanup dollars have been spent on remediation.

And millions more will be needed — an estimated \$45 million to clean up and contain the toxic bottom sediments at the east harbour Randle Reef.

In this year's progress report, the Bay Area Restoration Council concentrated on water quality and whether the ongoing monitoring and reporting of the cleanup targets would be good enough to satisfy the IJC, get the harbour off the list and accomplish ecosystem recovery.

Last year's report centred on fish and wildlife, and the 2006 report will concentrate on toxic substances and sediment remediation.

Andrew Sebestyen headed up the committee of BARC volunteers who took an in-depth look at the monitoring in place and says there were "no major surprises."

There is enough time in the decade ahead to plug some of the gaps found by the committee, he said.

But it raised two flags that are obstacles to getting the harbour delisted by 2015:

■ The need for new and long-term funding.

■ The loss and the looming retirements of key people.

Much of the monitoring is research carried out by agencies such as the Royal Botanical Gardens, which has been crippled by budget and staff cuts.

"The RBG is one of the key monitoring components because Cootes Paradise is the nursery for Hamilton Harbour; the eggs are laid there, the fish hatch there and end up going into the harbour and the RBG is a key focus of some of the funding," said Sebestyen, environment manager at Stelco.

Succession planning is needed for the key people, and the funding agencies need to keep the money going because "monitoring is not a one-time thing but means repeatability," he said.

Time frames for the monitoring and to achieve the final delisting targets need to be established, the report recommends.

Reducing the nutrients going into the harbour from four waste treatment plants, especially the big Woodward Avenue plant, is a concern.

The nutrients feed algae, which rob the water of oxygen needed by fish.

Contaminants flowing into streams and soil washing from subdivision construction into the harbour are also worries. The committee recommends the now-suspended monitoring of the Red Hill Creek watershed be restarted when the expressway is completed.

Geese and gulls are suspected as the source of high bacteria counts and closed swimming beaches at Bayfront and Pier 4 parks. A program to remove the birds will be carried out this summer.

Industries such as Stelco and Dofasco are meeting their targets for the quality of water discharges, the report notes.

About 46 per cent of the harbour's 45 kilometres of shoreline is used by industry, 10 per cent is residential and the remaining 44 per cent is private, institutional or public open space.