

Environmentalists report harbour is on the mend

But they fear cuts will slow recovery

BY ERIC McGUINNESS

The Bay Area Restoration Council is already building its case to get Hamilton Harbour off the official list of Great Lakes pollution hotspots, even though it won't happen before 2015.

The council says the harbour is more than halfway to meeting targets of the Remedial Action Plan and it wants to be sure it has enough evidence of the cleanup to present to the Canada-U.S. International Joint Commission (IJC) when the work is done.

With that in mind, a council committee recently began questioning federal and provincial scientists and agencies such as the Royal Botanical Gardens to be sure sufficient monitoring information – and the right kind – is being gathered.

The council began with fish and wildlife targets and on that front says things are looking good. In a report released yesterday, it said fish and wildlife restoration work is ahead of efforts to improve water quality and deal with contaminated sediment on the harbour bottom.

It concludes there will be enough monitoring information to show fish and wildlife targets have been met by 2015, but only if wildlife

populations continue to be surveyed and contaminant levels measured.

The council identifies some data gaps – calling for tests of harbour fish flavour and more checks for tumours and deformities – and expresses concern over insecure funding, budget priorities and the possible departure or retirement of key people.

Roland Weiler, the council's chairman, said the overall finding is important because it means researchers have been observing the right indicators, something that hadn't been clear before.

Andrew Sebestyen, a council board member and environment manager for Stelco Hamilton, said: "This report has confirmed that we have a very good picture of how harbour fish and wildlife are doing.

"There is some room for enhancements, but if this keeps up, we're confident that we'll have enough information to prove that a significant component of harbour restoration has been achieved."

Sebestyen, Weiler and other authors of the report stressed it was produced by community volunteers, aided by technical advisers, who interviewed and gathered information from governments, McMaster University and the RBG.

Next year's report will deal with

water quality. Weiler said in an interview the council is worried the RBG's financial crisis and an impending review of its mandate could weaken its role in restoring the Cootes Paradise marsh and protecting the lower reaches of Grindstone Creek, both essential elements of the harbour Remedial Action Plan.

"I hope whatever happens, the RBG programs can be continued, hopefully by the RBG but if not by some other entity. The RBG owns a fair amount of land through which various creeks drain into Cootes. It's been looking after those creeks carefully and I hope the ball isn't dropped."

Council manager Marilyn Baxter said the biggest remaining water quality challenge is to reduce the flow from Hamilton sewage plants of nutrients that spur the growth of algae, which when it decays robs the water of oxygen needed by fish and other animal life. There is also a plan to contain toxic sediments around Randle Reef near Stelco's Hilton Works, but Baxter said that project is a year behind schedule because of a delay in detailed engineering work. Construction now won't start before next year.

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