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COMMUNIQUÉ

TO: First Nations Leadership

FROM: Ryan Bowie, Program Manager – Chiefs of Ontario Environment Sector

DATE: May 31, 2023

RE: Release of the Auditor General of Ontario's *The State of the Environment in Ontario* Report

ISSUE SUMMARY:

On May 16, 2023, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk and Commissioner of the Environment Tyler Schulz released the ***State of the Environment in Ontario*** Report. The report gathers information from various Ontario government ministries and other sources to produce an overview of the state of Ontario's air, water, land and waste, climate, and nature and wildlife.

REPORT OVERVIEW:

The Office of the Auditor General of Ontario's report on the State of the Environment in Ontario takes a long view on the impacts, changes, and improvements to a variety of environmental indicators in Ontario. The motivation for the Report is that the Government of Ontario is not providing clear and transparent information on how its policy decisions are affecting the environment. The authors in their "Reflections" note "unless the environmental outcomes of actions are effectively measured, monitored and publicly reported, there will be limited transparency, accountability and understanding of their impacts". As the Government of Ontario has not produced a consolidated report on how Ontario is doing in protecting the environment for future generations, this Report aims to set an example and to encourage the Province to regularly report on how well it is protecting the environment.

The report found that Ontario's air and Great Lakes water quality have improved in many ways over the past several decades. This assessment includes timeframes prior to the implementation of major environmental programs, such as the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. These improvements and the health of water

bodies is highly variable. Lake Ontario and Lake Erie are generally more polluted than the other Great Lakes, plagued by issues such as increased algae blooms in Lake Erie, and rising levels of microplastics in Lake Ontario. The biological health of rivers and streams is under threat, with 60 per cent of monitored streams in Ontario rated as “fairly poor” to “very poor”. The report also notes that as of February 2023, there are still 24 Long-Term Drinking Water Advisories at public drinking water systems in Ontario that are funded by the Department of Indigenous Services Canada, impacting 21 First Nations communities.

Air quality improvements are primarily due to improved pollution control equipment for cars and industry, and the phase-out of coal-fired electricity between 2005 and 2014. However, ground-level ozone, which can trigger asthma and other breathing issues, has increased by 23 per cent from 1990 to 2019. Air pollution still causes an estimated 6,580 premature deaths across the province and more than 4,000 hospital admissions and visits per year. A warming climate from increased global greenhouse gas emissions has raised Ontario’s surface air temperature, in turn, reducing Great Lakes’ ice cover and increasing the number of weather-related disasters.

The report notes that the trend of converting natural land cover for human use is slower than in the centuries following European settlement. Remaining wetlands and forests continue to be lost. Invasive species are spreading and more native species continue to be classified as ‘at risk’. The number of hectares lost to deforestation every year is nearly four times greater than the number of hectares of newly established forests. Targets set in 2017 for the protection of wetlands were dropped in 2021 and their statuses are no longer tracked by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. With regards to agriculture, soil erosion remains a problem, and 2016 data also shows that 87 per cent of cropland is losing soil carbon annually, which can further contribute to climate change. Concerning waste management, the province’s current landfill capacity is capable of accepting up to only 13 more years of waste as population growth, and higher levels of consumption and rising use of single-use items and packaging have led to an increase in waste generation.

CONSIDERATIONS:

As an examination of the state of the environment in Ontario, the Auditor General’s report provides a useful overview of the status and trends of key environmental indicators. Overall, it demonstrates precarious progress with significant continuing and new stresses on the environment. There is little in the report that directly addresses First Nations, either through impacts specific to First Nations peoples, or roles in the policy making process. As such, the colonial goals and practices of the Ontario government are not captured by the report in explaining environmental policy decisions.

It is important to note that the Report does not consider the impact of more recent legislation, such as Bill 23: More Homes Built Faster Act, Greenbelt withdrawals, and Bill 71: Building More Mines Act. There are also proposed changes to environmental assessments and numerous incursions into municipal and regional planning that together constitute a massive and reckless rollback of environmental protections and public planning processes. Legislative changes in Ontario have occurred without consultation with First Nations, and have also diminished participation roles for the general public. The appendices that follow the main report include several tables that offer further information on environmental policy, legislation, and programs, and how they impact environmental issues in Ontario. Adding recent initiatives by the Ontario government, particularly those regarding housing, mining and roads, to these tables, reveals an increasing disregard for environmental considerations.

While the Auditor's Report aims to encourage transparency and consideration of the impacts of governments' policies and actions, the Government of Ontario has done little to indicate that the environment is a priority. Rather, environmental protections appear to be an obstacle to the current provincial government's development priorities, as are the rights, jurisdiction, and obligations to First Nations peoples and governments. The Auditor General's State of the Environment in Ontario Report is helpful evidence that demonstrates the need for stronger environmental protections, and for the need to engage with First Nations on these matters.

ATTACHMENTS:

[The State of the Environment in Ontario, Office of the Auditor General of Ontario \(May, 2023\)](#)