

Northern Business Journal: Funding cuts to MNR a disgrace

Our Association has received several inquiries regarding fish and wildlife conservation on the French River. I have reprinted this article from a Northern Ontario Business Journal and would ask that you review it and consider sending a letter to the Ontario Government to voice your displeasure with the funding cuts. I would recommend contacting North Bay's Member of the Legislature to express your concern. Visit her web site at www.moniquesmithmmp.ca to get the correct contact info.

*Paul Cormier
President - UFRCA*

There has been increasing concern expressed over the health of the Ministry of Natural Resources' fish and wildlife program, including its law enforcement. Earlier this month, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) said in press releases that there have been deep cuts to the work of conservation officers (COs). "As hunting season begins in earnest, morale among conservation officers is at an all-time low, and for good reason," said OPSEU President Leah Casselman. "We have fewer officers in the field and the officers that we do have are being forced to ration gas for their patrol vehicles." The release states there were 257 uniformed officers in the field in 1992 and this year there are 199, a 31 per cent reduction.

The union also claims operating expenses for the COs are about one-half of what they were last year. A media spokesman for the MNR said "everything essentially is the same as last year." "Things are running as they were last year," said Steve Payne. "Our people will be out in the field and will be patrolling. End of story." When asked about cuts to operating expenses, Payne replied, "You should ask them (OPSEU) where that information is coming from." Steve Pye, spokesperson for the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH), said the group has been asking serious questions about the health of the law enforcement program.

"We wrote the minister (David Ramsay) and we are not very satisfied at all with his response," he said. "There have been rumours and innuendoes flying around for months and months about enforcement cut-backs and while the MNR might have maintained the number of officers, the question is how many are in the field." Cuts to the enforcement branch, Pye said, are a symptom of a "bigger and more detrimental situation coming from Queen's Park and that is a severe lack of funding for the ministry's fish and wildlife program which does include enforcement."

That program includes fish stocking, habitat projects, research and monitoring. Pye said currently in the province, 50 per cent of all fish stocking is done by volunteers.

The federation has recently taken over a fish hatchery that was scheduled to be mothballed along with another community-based program that was scheduled to be axed.

"This is a disgrace," Pye said. "We live in a province that prides itself on natural resources and outdoor opportunities that fuel local economies and the government is not stepping up to the plate with sufficient funding." "Right now this is the federation's top priority and we have been dealing with this for months," Pye said. "Earlier this year we made a presentation to the standing committee on finance and economic affairs and it is no secret that . . . the MNR's wildlife program is broke. In fact, some key MNR staff have told us that it is bankrupt." The ministry's fish and wildlife program's budget has been flatlined at \$78 million, Pye said. "(Ontario Premier Dalton) McGuinty made a promise that he would restore funding to the MNR and so far that hasn't happened," he said. Two-thirds of the \$78 million is paid by hunting, fishing and trapping fees and licences. The federation proposes that a budget of \$120-million would restore full funding. "It's not an unreasonable ask for a province that benefits enormously from anglers and hunters," Pye said.

Hunting alone had an economic impact of \$1.4 billion in 2000 and generates more wealth than the province's film and television industry. In 2004, Ontario deer and moose hunters alone paid \$10 million in licensing fees. In 2003, the big game industry was worth \$220 million, a level of expenditure, Pye said, that created almost 4,500 year-round jobs. "Don't ever underestimate the economic power of folks who take a week or so to do a little hunting," he said. "Queen's Park is choking out valuable fish and wildlife program while anglers and hunters buy their licences and moose tags and contribute. We don't mind doing that but there has to be a commitment from the government."

The cutbacks also jeopardize the ministry's international reputation, Pye said. In its day, the MNR was the model wildlife agency in North America. "To turn your back on an internationally recognized success story — everything from rabies protection to species reintroduction, partnerships with grassroots organizations like the OFAH and international recognition as one of the greatest achievements in conservation — is beyond me why you would let that slide," Pye said. OPSEU is also predicting the number of charges and convictions related to fish and wildlife laws will drop for this year and next due to the budget cutbacks and reduced patrols.

MPP Gilles Bisson (NDP — Timmins-James Bay), said cuts to the ministry have been occurring for quite some time due to budget reductions by both the Tories and Liberals.

"In fact, the Tories cut the MNR budget in half and then basically it has been flat-lined. Costs do go up and services still need to be provided but not on the same dollar," he said.

Conservation officers, he said, don't have the funding to conduct regular patrols and are instead working on a complaint basis and will investigate if they believe "something is going on." "I have gotten calls at my constituency office from those who are worried about this," Bisson said. "Most people want to make sure that whatever goes on in the bush happens on the up and up and they realize conservation officers play a role in that."

Over the years, ministries such as the MNR and the Ministry of Environment have become less "sexy," he said, and attention has been focused on the agendas of the bigger cities.

Bisson said the solution is more money but it is not always as simple as that. The government needs to look at what its core services are and what it does best and make sure it concentrates on what it does best. Bisson said a good portion of revenue also comes from the hunters and anglers purchasing licences and paying fees. Said Pye, "We are adamant that the government step up to the plate and correct years and years of strangulation."

BY LIZ COWAN

Posted: 11/22/2006