



Environment isn't an election issue – it's about our survival

Last year, Ontario experienced hundreds more wildfires in the north than the usual average. In the southern and eastern parts of the province, extreme flooding has also become more common in recent years.

The frequency and severity of extreme weather events is just one of the results of climate change. We're seeing it all over the world, and here in Ontario too.

Election cycles are short, and the issue-of-the-day can hit at immediate concerns. The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, health care, jobs and the cost of living are all, understandably, top of mind. Yet a sustainable future, for Ontarians and our planet, depends on environmental stewardship. That's what will ensure our long term well-being.

Climate change, air quality, water quality, bio-diversity loss and pollution can be intimidating concepts. And the news can be disheartening.

This February, the latest report of the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that nearly half the world's population is already vulnerable to increasingly dangerous climate impacts. Those impacts are now happening much quicker than scientists had anticipated, and countries aren't acting fast or far enough.

"Unchecked carbon pollution is forcing the world's most vulnerable on a frogmarch to destruction," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said upon the IPCC report's release. "The facts are undeniable. This abdication of leadership is criminal."

While the harm is daunting, progress is possible.

That's why the environment is one of the core advocacy issues for RTOERO. We're a trusted voice for healthy, active living in retirement. Our 81,000-plus members believe in the power of our community to secure a better future, and understand that the health of our environment is paramount to that.

The response to the pandemic shows that we can drive massive change with the right leadership. During this provincial election campaign we want to focus on three environmental areas where we can make a difference.

One, environmentally-sustainable transportation.

Transportation accounts for the largest share of greenhouse gas emissions. In recent years, we've seen Ontario's GHG emissions rise for the first time in nearly a decade, and the cap-and-trade program abandoned.

Ontario's 2018 environmental plan outlined specific targets of reductions from different sources of carbon emissions, to be reached by 2030. That ranged from the uptake of electric vehicles to the use of renewable energy. We are no longer on target.

Progressive government policies can drive more sustainable transportation in Ontario, i.e. electric vehicles, cleaner public transport, clean fuel standards, biking, etc.

Two, recycling and plastics.

With all the recycling efforts made by municipalities and companies, there's much room to improve. For instance, Deloitte reports that just 9% of the plastic waste generated annually in Canada is recycled.

Even with a robust Blue Box program in Ontario, this province has a poor return rate for plastic bottles. One estimate is that over 1.5 billion plastic bottles a year are not recycled in Ontario, ending up in landfills or the environment.

Government policies or incentives can help us move from a linear economy (ongoing consumption of resources) to a circular one (reusing resources). Other steps can help us to increase the recycling rate, and lower contamination rates (i.e. non-recyclable material in the recycling system). We need a government approach to manage the entire life cycle of plastics.

Three, safe water supply.

Our freshwater resources are a national treasure. The Great Lakes, for instance, hold over 20% of the entire world's surface freshwater. Yet pollution and misuse threatens that. Legislation and changes in business practices both have a role in protecting our freshwater sources and eliminating boil water orders.

There is some good news in Ontario. In December 2021 the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte First Nation (MBQ) lifted two long-term drinking water advisories, which had been in place since 2003 and 2012. But other advisories remain. The Neskantaga First Nation (a fly-in community located about 435 kms northeast of Thunder Bay) has been under a boil-water advisory for close to 27 years – the longest such advisory in Canada.

Beyond just calling on the federal government to fulfill its responsibility, Ontario can also play a part in supporting upgraded water systems and alleviating the drinking water crisis in the province's First Nations communities.

A sustainable future depends on responsible use of resources, conservation and protecting our air, land and water. Individuals, companies and industry groups all have a part to play in environmental stewardship, and so does government.

We need to hold government accountable to maintain the viability of our ecosystems for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren.