

NDACT not impressed by ARA report

The North Dufferin Agriculture and Community Taskforce board is meeting this week to discuss what measures, if any, it can take to counter what it views as glaring omissions and the weak language of the Aggregate Resources Act review recommendations.

NDACT spokesman Carl Cosack is not alone in saying that the recommendations "totally ignore what the public" and not just the agricultural community "had been calling for: protection of source water and preservation of prime farmland."

The report, tabled last week in the provincial Legislature, does make reference to prime farmland but Mr. Cosack finds the language weak in such "recommendations" as: "The Ministry of Natural Resources in its approval and administration of aggregate sites located on prime agricultural/and (as defined in the Provincial Policy Statement), or on other agricultural lands that were under cultivation prior to aggregate extraction, should ensure, wherever practical, the phased progressive rehabilitation of these sites and their expeditious return to agricultural production. Rehabilitative measures shall act to restore land, where practical, to agricultural capability(ies) or production equal to or higher than its capability(ies) or production prior to extraction."

Such recommendations, he says, are open to interpretation and "don't set aside (areas that need protection under the Act)." In an apparent allusion to the recent mega-quarry fight in Melancthon, he said there are some areas in which neither the source water nor the prime farmland could be rehabilitated.

Mr. Cosack's impression of the report of the all-party committee was that the interests of the public "outside the industry" were being ignored.

John Decrombugghe of AWARE Simcoe, a group with aims similar to NDACT, says the recommendations fail to address adequately what the Ontario Federation of Agriculture was asking: "That the ARA, regulations and operating standards be amended to acknowledge and protect the vital role of our agricultural lands; (and) That aggregate extraction be prohibited on prime agricultural land -- Classes 1-4 -- including Specialty Crop Lands."

The report does go into detail about sites visited in Dufferin-Caledon, Kitchener-Waterloo, Ottawa and Manitoulin, among others, and appears to emphasize which have been restored to hay and canola crops, but does not indicate what was cultivated prior to the excavation and does not show the number that have been "rehabilitated" to lakes.

And Mr. De Crombugghe's comment on the tours is that, "Other aspects of the ARA report demonstrate the close relationship between the Committee and the aggregate industry. The report describes 12 aggregate sites visited by the MPPs, but misrepresents the tour taken of the proposed Mega Quarry site."

"As well, testimony from the Canadian Environmental Law Association revealed there are nearly 7,000 abandoned pits and quarries in Ontario and, at the current rate of rehabilitation, it would take between 90 and 335 years to rehabilitate all of them," he says in an email.

Mr. De Crombugghe as well as Mr. Cosack says there was an obvious close relationship between the reviewing committee and the Ontario Stone, Sand & Gravel Association.

"The Committee also thanks the aggregate industry, the Ontario Stone, Sand and Gravel Association (OSSGA) in particular, for its help in organizing the tours and input in the review. "Unfortunately, no such courtesies are extended to the many and respected agricultural stakeholders who participated in the process," said Mr. De Crombugghe.

For its part, OSSGA said in a news release last Friday that it welcomed the 38 recommendations of the report. CEO Moreen Miller said the report "recognizes the critical role that Ontario's aggregate resources play in building the transportation and community infrastructure that sustains our way of life in Ontario" especially as the GTHA continues to grow.

?It also balances a number of complex land-use planning and related issues with the reality that geography has predetermined the location of this limited, non-renewable aggregate resource.?

Ms. Miller said her association has a ?continued willingness to work with the

Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ontario Government as it addresses topics raised by the

report and implements recommendations.

?We have a strong track record as a trusted partner because we want to be a part of the solution,? Ms. Miller is quoted as saying.

And, for its part, NDACT is not relying on the recommendations to change anything but is pursuing its Food & Water Campaign in the hopes that someone in authority will recognize the critical state of Class 1 farmland and also the dangers that mining can pose for source water.

By Wes Keller