

The Environment is Under Attack, We Need Your Help to Fight Back

The laws and policies protecting Manitoba's environment are under attack. Widespread deregulation has quietly been taking place in Manitoba's environmental sector.

First, it was the lifting of the moratorium on new industrial hog operations. Changes were also made to the way we review the effectiveness of our phosphorus regulation (phosphorus being a major contributor to the eutrophication of Lake Winnipeg) and how we measure and report nitrates (too much nitrate-nitrogen in our drinking water can cause significant health problems). Recently, the Clean Environment Commission, the entity that is supposed to facilitate public participation in environmental matters, was tasked with producing a report focused on decreasing environmental legislative requirements for the forest management plan approval process in a way that excluded consideration of public, Indigenous and academic opinion.

This ongoing environmental deregulation reflects the priorities of a government that values unsustainable development over conservation and ease of industrial project approval over democratic governance.

Changes to *The Planning Act* two years ago, through Bill 19, resulted in a loss of decision-making power for rural municipal councils in relation to aggregate quarry operations and intensive livestock operations. These democratically elected councils can now have their decisions overruled by the provincially appointed Municipal Board.

A similar reduction in power for elected municipal officials is being proposed in Bill 37, *The Planning Amendment and City of Winnipeg Charter Amendment Act*. If passed, this law will also give the Municipal Board the power to overturn land use decisions made by the City of Winnipeg when appeals are made by developers.

Another troubling legislative development, Bill 35 (formerly Bill 44), which amends *The Public Utilities Board Act*, among others, will strip the Public Utilities Board of its impartial oversight of the setting of utility rates for electricity and gas. Proposed regulatory changes will also reduce opportunity for public participation

in the utility rate setting process. This could lead to the overt politicization of Manitoba Hydro as utility rates will be established by Cabinet behind closed doors.

The Auditor General of Manitoba has recently issued a somber assessment of provincial oversight of drinking water safety and highlighted some of the critical deficiencies inherent in Manitoba's ability to provide adequate safeguards for its citizens' health and the environment. The report noted that efforts to adopt better drinking water quality standards in order to protect human health have been impeded by the red tape reduction mandate of the government as the 'two-for-one rule' requires two existing regulatory requirements be removed for every new requirement created.

The development priorities of the current government are also cause for concern. Many of the industrial developments being supported and promoted will likely increase our greenhouse gas emissions and denigrate our ground water and surface water ecosystems. This includes silica sand mining to supply the oil and gas fracking industry, increased peat strip mining, more intensive livestock operations, expanding the commercial potato industry and increasing the biofuel mandate. Manitoba is not on track to meet Canada's commitment of a 30% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and is not even talking about the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050. The potential privatization of Manitoba's provincial parks is also very concerning.

Has anything good happened in the last few years? We give kudos when they are deserved. Innovation in working with philanthropic organizations has helped fund conservation and stewardship organizations in this province and Manitoba is showing signs of moving towards better watershed planning. More resources will be required on this front and we hope the new trust funds established will not mean a relinquishment of government's own duty and responsibility to protect the environment.

However, to forge ahead we must change our development priorities and move away from environmental deregulation. It is time for the Government of

Manitoba to restore public trust, improve accountability and transparency and listen to Manitobans, especially our youth, the generation that has the most to lose. They are leading the call for a Green New Deal, a vision of Manitoba's future that includes increases to the renewable energy sector, an Environmental Bill of Rights, bold emission reduction targets, the implementation of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and laws and policies that make sure that our most vulnerable citizens are not left behind.

The Manitoba Eco-Network will continue to work hard and do our best to oppose the onslaught of problematic regulatory and policy changes. We are grateful for our supporters and members and are thankful for the hardworking community organizations and NGOs that are also seeking a sustainable and inclusive future by our side. But we cannot do this alone. Creating a better future is the responsibility of all Manitobans. It is time to come together, speak up, and fight for a Manitoba that future generations will be proud of.

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