

PRESS RELEASE

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## RESEARCH GROUP ASSAILS FEDERAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT PROCEDURE

Ottawa ---

In a speech delivered to the Canadian Society of Environmental Biologists, a Toronto-based environmental law research group severely criticized the present federal administrative environmental assessment process as "non-enforceable directives, which agencies cannot be legally compelled to carry out."

The address was presented in Ottawa at a conference of biologists discussing future environmental impact assessment procedures.

Canadian Environmental Law Association researcher John Low said, in reference to the lack of provisions for public involvement in the federal process, "Administrative procedures are less available to public scrutiny and evaluation, let alone participation, than procedures established by legislation. Taken by themselves they should not be applauded or made the subject of national self-congratulation." He added, "Administrative procedures are simply the government talking to itself - and doing so, far too often, in such a way as to make sure it is not overheard."

He said that the report of a task force appointed by the federal government itself had recommended the implementation of legislation that would guarantee public access to information, permit public participation in hearings and reviews, require consideration of alternatives to proposed projects, and establish an independent Environmental Review Board to administer the Environmental Impact Assessment Programme.

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In discussing the process of implementing an environmental assessment procedure in Ontario, Mr. Low pointed out what he claimed was a hostile attitude to public involvement on the part of several government ministers, despite earlier statements by the provincial Minister of the Environment that the public would be assured the right to obtain information on, and to participate in, the process by which the legislation would be implemented. He quoted from letters from government ministers which indicated that they were not prepared to reveal to the public their comments to the Ministry of the Environment regarding the proposed legislation. This, he said, was evidence that a change in attitude would be needed if governments seriously wanted to include the public in their deliberations.

He then focused on several features that a future environmental assessment programme would have to include if public participation was to become a reality. These included legislative appeal of Review Board decisions, a guarantee of public access to information, and the assurance that standing requirements would permit any person or group with a legitimate environmental complaint to appear before the proposed Environmental Review Board.

Concluding his remarks, Mr. Low said that environmental scientists have the responsibility to ensure that an assessment process be implemented in which they would have the same pre-eminent role as economic planners have always enjoyed.

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