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INTERVENOR

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health for over 50 years*

Safe Drinking Water 25 Years After Walkerton

In May 2000, seven people died, and over two thousand became severely ill after the municipal water supply in Walkerton, Ontario, became contaminated with E. coli.

This event triggered a two-year provincial inquiry — led by Justice Dennis O'Connor — into the causes of the contamination in Walkerton (Part 1) and the state of drinking water protection in Ontario (Part 2). The Inquiry revealed a disorganized water management system in the province that relied on voluntary compliance from municipalities that lacked expertise and resources. In the reports that followed, Justice O'Connor made 121 recommendations for strengthening drinking water protection in Ontario.

The Walkerton Inquiry helped introduce a robust multi-barrier approach to drinking water safety in Ontario and resulted in an overhaul of Ontario's drinking water laws and regulations. It was the foundation for Ontario's *Safe Drinking Water Act (2002)* and *Clean Water Act (2006)*, which continue to regulate our water systems today.

Now, 25 years later, we must continue to recognize this significant event and examine both the advancements in drinking water protection that it prompted and the remaining gaps in Ontario's current drinking water protection regime.

[Read the full blog post](#) by Communications Intern Elizabeth Kwofie, where she examines Ontario's *Safe Drinking Water Act (2002)* and *Clean Water Act (2006)*, discusses the status of Justice O'Connor's recommendations, and reviews two recent enactments — Bills 97 (2023) and 23 (2022) — which seem to go out of their way to undermine the existing water protection laws, policies, and agencies created to prevent threats to drinking water following the Walkerton tragedy.

The blog also touches on the recent audit conducted by Ontario's Auditor General, which has raised alarms about the province's failure to adequately oversee non-municipal drinking water systems, leaving millions of Ontarians at risk. **This is a stark reminder that the work of protecting our drinking water is far from finished.**

Action Alert

Ontario Omnibus Bill 5: Another Rollback of Environmental Law

On April 17, 2025, Ontario's Minister of Energy and Mines introduced omnibus Bill 5 (*Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act, 2025*).

This wide-ranging bill contains ten different schedules which, if enacted, will amend or repeal various statutes that are important components of Ontario's environmental law framework.

For example, Bill 5 proposes to:

- streamline the *Mining Act* to expedite mining activities
- amend the *Environmental Assessment Act* to exempt two contentious projects
- repeal the *Endangered Species Act, 2007* and replace it with a watered-down *Species Conservation Act, 2025*
- empower the Ontario government to declare "special economic zones" in which provincial laws and municipal by-laws are inoperative

The province's unpersuasive rationale for these changes is that Ontario's environmental laws must be amended in order to facilitate economic development and address current tariff battles.

If implemented, however, Bill 5 will weaken or eliminate legislative safeguards which protect the environment, human health, and Indigenous rights.

CELA is preparing a legal analysis of Bill 5 that will be posted on the [Action Alert](#) section of our website soon. **The deadline for submitting public comments on Bill 5 is May 17, 2025.** CELA encourages Ontario residents to let the province know that these latest legislative rollbacks are unacceptable, and that Bill 5 must be immediately withdrawn.



Photo Credit - Linda Pim

Case Updates

Case Update - Dresden Landfill

CELA represents [Dresden CARED](#), a residents' group opposed to a proposed waste disposal facility in Dresden, Ontario.

Last year, the provincial government made a regulation that appropriately designated this controversial project under the *Environmental Assessment Act* (EA Act). This meant that the private proponent would have to prepare a Comprehensive Environmental Assessment and obtain approval to proceed under the EA Act.

Unfortunately, the Ontario government recently introduced omnibus [Bill 5](#) (*Protecting Ontario by Unleashing our Economy Act, 2025*) which includes amendments to the EA Act - if passed, these exemptions would **wholly exempt** this specific project from the EA Act.

CELA and our client strongly object to this unjustifiable exemption and we call upon the Ontario government to immediately withdraw it from Bill 5.

Law Reform Updates

CELA Brings Together Organizations to Protect Ontario Drinking Water

CELA is bringing together a group of water protection and environmental organizations to demand that everyone in Ontario has access to clean drinking water, regardless of where they live.

A [recent report](#) from Ontario's Auditor General highlighted significant weaknesses in the provincial government's ability to ensure that non-municipal drinking water systems are in good condition and that the water they deliver is safe to drink.

The audit raised alarm bells about large inspection backlogs, staffing capacity issues, and failures to enforce testing requirements for non-municipal systems, which serve over three-million people in primarily rural and remote areas.

CELA and more than two dozen organizations have co-signed a letter urging the province to commit to timelines for when they will address the Auditor General's 17 recommendations on how to improve the safety of non-municipal drinking water systems. Ontario's leadership must not forget the lessons of the Walkerton tragedy and recommit to never taking drinking water for granted.

PFAS – “Forever” and “Everywhere” Chemicals Added to Canada's National Pollutant Release Inventory

Canada has taken a crucial step by adding 163 per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) substances to the National Pollutant Release Inventory (NPRI), enhancing community right-to-know about these "forever chemicals."

Effective 2025, facilities must report PFAS releases and transfers. This is vital due to PFAS' persistence, ubiquity, and health risks, including immune and thyroid issues, and certain cancers.

While a positive move, the reporting has limitations. Only a fraction of the 15,000+ PFAS substances are included, and key groups like fluoropolymers are missing. The reporting threshold of 1 kg per substance at 0.1% concentration could exclude many facilities. Additionally, the standard employee threshold for reporting might overlook PFAS usage in smaller operations.

Despite these flaws, adding PFAS to the NPRI is a significant step towards understanding and addressing PFAS pollution. Learn more in two recent blogs posts on CELA's website. The [first addresses](#) Canada's decision to add PFAS to the NPRI, while the [second blog](#) discusses what is needed to improve reporting.

Environmental Compliance Approval Issued for Algoma Steel Despite Objections

Algoma Steel Inc. - a steel producing facility located in Sault Ste Marie - is transitioning to an electric arc furnace. The initial public posting regarding amendments to their Environmental Compliance Approval (ECA) lacked detail, such as missing documentation and information about emission levels. CELA filed a formal objection requesting more details and an extended public comment period.

A large number of public comments were received by the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks on the proposal. 149 comments were received through the Environmental Registry of Ontario and 197 comments were sent by email.

Unfortunately, despite these objections, the Ministry [recently approved](#) and issued Algoma Steel's ECA. The Ministry's decision does not address concerns about pollution levels in the community before any transition to the electric arc furnace.



Photo Credit - Linda Pim

From the Foundation

April Feature

This month's feature from the Canadian Environmental Law Foundation is a [1983 submission](#) written by then-CELA Research Director Frank Giorno

regarding proposed revisions to the *Mining Act, 1980*.

The submission recommended that the Ministry of Natural Resources assert the priorities of ecological protection, review projects under the *Environmental Assessment Act*, prioritize public participation, and "eliminate the Ministry of Natural Resources' often contradictory dual role of protector and developer of public lands".

Webinars and Resources

New Reports - Failing the Future: Extreme Heat in Schools and Child-Care Settings

Extreme heat events significantly impact the health and well-being of students, teachers, and staff in schools across Canada. The impacts of heat on children are of serious concern given their unique vulnerability. Despite this, there remains no comprehensive federal or provincial law, policy or investment to ensure climate resilience in educational or child-care settings.

CELA recently published [two new reports](#) detailing the impacts of extreme heat on children in child-care facilities and schools in Ontario and made 16 recommendations to better protect the health and safety of our kids. Recommendations in the reports include a maximum indoor temperature standard, dedicated funding to retrofit schools and child-care facilities without air conditioning or heat pumps, better data on indoor temperatures and the impacts of heat on children, and shade guidelines to cool outdoor spaces.

CELA released these reports in alignment with the [Healthy Environments for Learning Day \(HELD\) 2025 campaign](#), which took place on Thursday April 24th, 2025.

Clean Air Partnership Webinar

Indoor Heat Bylaw Series: Understanding the Heat Risk Landscape in Canadian Communities

Wednesday, May 7, 2025
1:00-2:30pm ET

This workshop, hosted by Clean Air Partnership (CAP), will provide an overview of the impact of frequent heat events on health and equity in our communities. It will explore the roles played by local governments in addressing heat events, introduce CAP's Heat Adaptation Project, and give an overview of North America's maximum temperature bylaws.

CELA counsel Jacqueline Wilson will present on municipal authority to implement a maximum temperature bylaw.

Visit the Accelerating Municipal Climate Change Adaptation to Extreme Heat [project page](#) to learn more about the project and upcoming webinars, or [register at this link](#).

Looking for a Publication?

CELA's charitable arm, the Canadian Environmental Law Foundation, maintains digital and physical collections that document the history of environmental protection across the country.

The Foundation recently launched a new website for the [Canadian Environmental Law Archives](#), allowing you to browse and search all of CELA's publications and historical records, as well as those of government agencies, watchdog authorities, nonprofit organizations, lawyers, and many of the country's most influential environmental advocates. In addition to the Archives, all of CELA's publications are listed in reverse chronological order on our [website here](#).

CELA also knows how fragile gains are and how easily they can be lost. One of the driving forces behind the creation of the Foundation and the Archive was a desire to protect and document the history of environmental law and environmental decision-making.

Support Our Work



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