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## Report urges province to tighten tap on moraine

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The verdant velvet of GTA golf courses comes at a price - constant irrigation of greens and fairways.

### **GOLF AND THE MORaine**

**250,000**

people get their drinking water from the Oak Ridges Moraine, formed more than 12,000 years ago by glaciers

**38**

golf courses are on or near the provincially protected green corridor

**3.1 billion litres**

of water is made available to moraine's 10 sampled golf courses each year, equal to annual needs of 25,000 people

July 30, 2008

**PHINJO GOMBU**  
URBAN AFFAIRS REPORTER

Ontario's environment ministry is being slammed in a new report for allowing dozens of golf courses on the protected Oak Ridges Moraine to draw billions of litres of water a year with little or no oversight.

The report, being jointly released today by the Earthroots and Ecojustice environmental groups, contends the province has not done a proper study of the cumulative impact on the moraine of golf courses and other large water users.

The moraine is the headwaters region for 65 streams flowing into lakes Simcoe, Scugog and Ontario, and the source of much of the region's drinking water.

Earthroots campaigner Josh Garfinkel says their research shows the province doesn't have accurate information on where golf courses are drawing their water from – an important issue because of a history of water shortages and declining groundwater levels in the Aurora-Newmarket area.

"What we need to do is have a better reporting method and monitoring of how much water is being taken and better enforcement of the laws and polices we have," said Hugh Wilkins, a lawyer for Ecojustice. "The government has a system to regulate, but it's not being properly implemented.

"This report shows we are not properly managing the use of these resources, and this may lead to problems in the future as our aquifers are depleted."

The 32-page report, titled *Ontario's Water Hazard*, studied 10 courses – including one yet to be built – among the 38 that are located on the moraine. Together, the 10 courses were found to have permits entitling them to use 3.1 billion litres of water a year – enough to cover the needs of 25,000 people.

The irrigation requirements of the golf courses are based on freedom of information requests and conversations with ministry officials, as well as the development application for the controversial Westhill golf course in Aurora.

The Westhill project, opposed by Aurora town council, involves building a golf course and condominiums outside the municipality's urban boundary. It's one of many new developments still on track on the moraine since the province ended an environmental war by passing the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan in 2001.

At issue are projects that were in the pipeline before the plan's passage, but that still need final approval by local councils.

The litany of oversight issues identified in the environmental report include expired and missing permits, incomplete data, and missing annual reports:

In one instance, a golf course's permit expired in 2001 but wasn't revoked until June 9, 2003. The ministry then issued a new permit under a new number – without a reprimand to the owners.

Another golf course, which had a permit to draw "surface" water, continued to do so for nearly a decade after its permit expired in 1990. During the renewal process, it was found the course was actually drawing water from deep aquifers using production wells.

The report says several golf courses omitted the depths of their wells and other information when filing their annual reports, or failed to file reports entirely.

The report acknowledges that many of the problems cited occurred prior to 2005, before changes were made to water-taking legislation.

But the environmental groups claim other problems persist to this day and are symptomatic of a lack of ministry oversight.

It says one golf course that recently added two wells and a new irrigation system had applied for the necessary permit in 2003 but didn't hear back from the ministry.

It was only after the owners reapplied, four years later, that the permit was granted – raising questions about whether the new wells were in place for that whole period without ministry oversight.

Just last August, Lebovic Enterprises's year-old permit to draw water for the planned Westhill course was revoked because the ministry suddenly realized an environmental assessment had not been done.

"The fact that no one appeared to notice this most basic requirement had not yet been met raises serious questions about common practice at the Ministry," the report states.

Ministry of Environment spokesperson John Steele yesterday acknowledged some of the report criticisms and said the lapses occurred after the ministry had staff cutbacks in the 1990s, while the Mike Harris Conservatives were in power, and went to a complaints-driven system.

"At the time the ministry was short-staffed," Steele said. "It's a much different system now."

Steele acknowledged the "big" job of figuring out exactly how much water is in the moraine aquifers is an ongoing process. Today's knowledge is

substantially better than a decade ago, but "it's going to take a while," he said.

Wilkins and Garfinkel said they were surprised to learn that a resource as environmentally sensitive as the moraine was not being better managed.

"I think the government recognizes that there are issues that have to be addressed and they will take action, but time is of the essence," Wilkins said.

The groups are seeking a moratorium on new golf courses on the moraine.

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