

**Environmental Commissioner's Presentation
Trenton Woodlot Conference, November 25, 2016
By Steven Moore**

One of the highlights of this year's conference was the presentation and discussion of the 2016 Greenhouse Gas Report called *Facing Climate Change* by Dr. Dianne Saxe.



The Environmental Commissioner of Ontario (<https://eco.on.ca>) is the province's environmental watchdog, an independent officer of the Legislature.

Dr. Dianne Saxe has been the Environmental Commissioner since December 2015. Her five-year appointment is focused on serving the Ontario Legislature, improving the effectiveness of the Environmental Bill of Rights, 1993, (EBR) and catalyzing better environmental, energy and climate outcomes for and with the people of Ontario.

Dr. Saxe began her presentation by focusing on public participation in government decision making, and the Environmental Registry is the main EBR mechanism for that public participation.

There are many features of the Registry that should be taken advantage of by OWA Members and Friends.

- It is a searchable on-line database of policies, acts, regulations and instruments.
- It contains the environmentally significant decisions of 15 ministries.
- It is maintained by the Ministry of the Environment.
- Ministries post proposed decisions and can also choose to post information notices as a means of keeping the public informed.
- There is a minimum 30-day comment period.
- Ministries must consider comments received and post a decision notice explaining how public comments were taken into consideration in reaching the final decision.
- There is a limited right to appeal.

The first step is to go to The Registry (<https://www.ebr.gov.on.ca/ERS-WEB-External/>) and enter keywords, a Registry Number, or even a postal code to find issues and proposed decisions that may affect you.

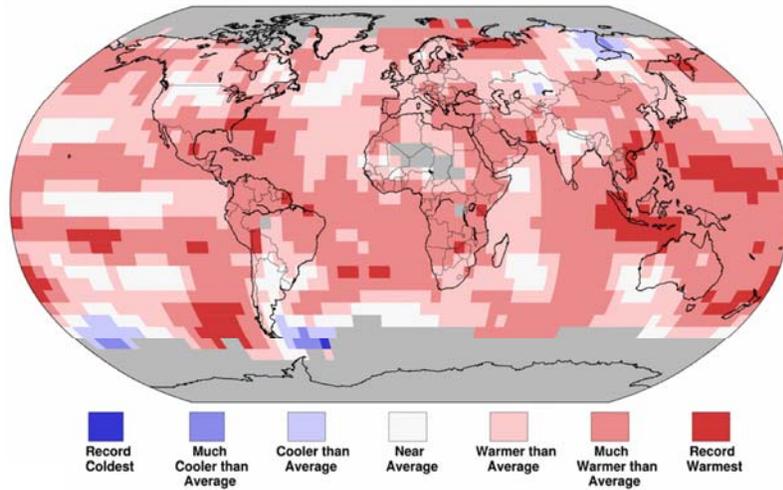
You can also sign up for alerts because the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario provides a service that will send you email alerts about notices on the Environmental Registry that may interest you.

For example, there is a chance to comment on the Crown Forest Carbon Policy and the role of managed Crown Forest in climate change mitigation. Comments will be accepted by January 23, 2017 (Registry # 012-8685).

One of the reports, *Walking the Fire Line*, focuses on managing and using fire by the MNRF in Ontario's Northern Forests. It recommends that MNRF should use moderate fire by a dedicated, capable prescribed fire team to promote tree species diversity, habitat, and the age and size of forests and trees. Moderate fire also reduces the worsening risk of catastrophic fire by climate change.

In her Climate Change report, Dr. Saxe makes a number of points. Climate change is real, human caused, moving much faster than predicted, a trillion-dollar financial threat, and immensely important.

January to August 2016



NOAA, website, *Global Analysis*, August 2016

“The news is not as bad as we think,” says Dr. Saxe, “It’s worse. It’s like telling someone that someone they love has a serious illness. But, pretending it’s not there will not make it better.”

As Mark Twain said, “Climate is what you expect. Weather is what you get.” We expect normal, we expect a climate like we used to have but normal is never coming back. If we stopped all our climate-changing activities today, the earth would still warm for 50 more years. The increase in severe weather we are experiencing now is due to the damage we did 50 years ago; it is guaranteed to get worse.

Ontario Warming Faster Than Average

- Number of frost-free days in Ontario increased by 18 days between 1979 and 2009.

18 days
over **30** years



Feeling the Heat: GHG Progress Report 2015: p. 37



What does this mean for our forests? You can look around and see the changes: more trees affected by ice storms, high winds, drought, invasive species and pests. Our forests are already under stress and trying to adapt.

Ontario does have a Climate Change Mitigation and Low-carbon Economy Act, which is a legal requirement to cut the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that are causing climate change from the 1990 baseline by 15% by 2020, 37% by 2030, and 80% by 2050.

Fossil fuel costs will rise and proceeds will go to a Greenhouse Gas Reduction Account to be spent as part of an Action Plan, but this will not be enough. To make the reductions that are necessary, we must put a price on greenhouse gas emissions because GHG emitters would emit less if they had to pay for the privilege. There are two main options: (1) a carbon tax and (2) a cap and trade system.

Cap and Trade has two parts. In the Cap part, a government issues a fixed number of allowances, and this cap drops over time. Emitters must pay for these allowances. As allowances become scarce, their price rises and it becomes cheaper for emitters to reduce their emissions than to buy future allowances.

In the Trade part, some emitters that are fossil fuel intensive or part of an aging industry will find it is cheaper to pay others to reduce emissions to stay under the cap than to reduce their own emissions. They can buy unused allowances from those who can reduce emissions more cheaply. The total amount of emissions goes down, high emitters are slowly forced out of business, and the negative impact on the economy is lower than from a carbon tax.

Ontario emitters can even link with other jurisdictions, like California, that have a cap and trade system, because climate change is a global problem.

But this probably won't be enough so there will have to be other ways to reduce the greenhouse gases in our atmosphere. For example, more carbon resides in soil than in the atmosphere and all plant life combined. Globally, there are 2,500 billion tons of carbon in soil, 800 billion tons in the atmosphere, and 560 billion tons in plant and animal life
([http://e360.yale.edu/feature/soil as carbon storehouse new weapon in climate fight/2744/](http://e360.yale.edu/feature/soil%20as%20carbon%20storehouse%20new%20weapon%20in%20climate%20fight/2744/))

Unsustainable farming, ranching, and land use practices have eliminated 100 billion tons of the original carbon stock in cultivated soils (Lal, R. Soil carbon sequestration impact on global climate change and food security. Science 304, 1623-1627, 2004). Our soils have the capacity to hold all our excess carbon if we switch to permaculture and smaller-scale organic farming instead of our current industrial agriculture that is killing the soil.

We can also expand our forests, create more urban forests, and manage existing forests for climate change.

“So far, Ontario has no climate change Action Plan,” says Dr. Saxe, “It is more of a direction than a plan. There is no precision in the numbers, it is a compromise document, there have been 44 drafts, several leaks, and the details are still being worked out.”

Yet, Dr. Saxe is optimistic.

“Be optimistic, be heard, have a strong organization, watch the Registry, contact your MP and MPP. Without public pressure we will not solve this problem, and you are the solution.”