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Signs set up in protest of Erin wastewater plant to protect the West Credit River

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By Rob Paul

Although the current COVID-19 stay-at-home order stops people in Ontario from gathering, it hasn't stopped a protest taking plan throughout the Town of Erin into Caledon and along the West Credit River.

It might not be the type of protest most people think of with picketers and a large number of protesters, but rather it's a visual public protest to stop the wastewater treatment plant that the Town of Erin is planning to build.

Erin has sewage issues and the Town needs a solution, but environmental organizations and protesters are calling for a federal impact assessment of the proposed wastewater treatment plant.

There are 700 signs on display protesting Erin's wastewater treatment plant because the design may place the West Credit River at risk. 7.2 million litres of sewage-effluent per day will be piped to and then discharged into Caledon's West Credit River—directly into the self-sustaining brook trout's ecosystem.

The West Credit River is located in a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve and flows over the Niagara Escarpment and into the Forks of the Credit tourist destination in Caledon.

Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Jonathan Wilkinson, will be making a decision on approval of a federal impact assessment for the project by May 26 and environmental groups and protesters are trying to raise as much awareness as they can by then through the visual protest and petitions.

Erin resident Ken Crowling began the protest by giving out hundreds of "Stop the Sewage Plant, Save Our Trout" lawn signs that are displayed on Caledon and Wellington County residential properties to show support.

His concern is that Council won't acknowledge flaws found in their environmental study report and Peel residents, communities, and the West Credit River will feel the impact of the downstream environmental costs.

His goal, along with environmental organizations like Ontario Headwaters Institute, is to ensure Wilkinson goes forward with a federal environmental impact assessment.

The biggest concern is that if the current wastewater design in a Greenbelt headwaters region goes forward, it will cause a loss of biodiverse integrity in the river. With effluent being put into fresh water, there needs to be three times the fresh water than there is effluent. Crowling compares it to mixing Kool-Aid, and he says the area is not in good enough shape for it.

"This proposed plant has gone back almost 20 years," said Crowling. "With the proposed site, they'll be putting the effluent right into the West Credit River. We have the lowest water we've ever seen in this area; I've never seen it so dry and where is the dilution going to come from (if the effluent is put into the water)? You're supposed to have X amount of fresh water to dilute the effluent plume; I can tell you right now it's not there."

Crowling's efforts to raise awareness has helped spread word in the Caledon region about how bleak the future of the river could be if it's not stopped.

"It blows my mind because when I'm in the Caledon area and I tell people about what this is going to do, they're in shock," Crowling said. "The visual protest over there (West Credit River at the Wellington-Caledon border) now is beautiful. I couldn't believe it. This area is stunningly gorgeous and it's just insanity that they want to put effluent into the river."

Recent history of issues with wastewater plants in the area has set precedence for what could happen if the plant moves forward in Erin, according to Crowling.

"Every plant that I've studied has had a failure—Shelburne, Orangeville, Tottenham, Bradford—everyone had a failure," said Crowling. "Built into sewage plants is a bypass valve, and when they can't maintain the amount of water and waste, they hit the bypass valve; it happened in Orangeville already—they hit that, and it's released into the West Credit River. This is the last natural self-sufficient brook trout river that we have in Southern Ontario, and we're going to put this at risk?"

The Ontario Headwaters Institute is one of the environmental advocacy groups leading the charge for a federal environmental impact assessment because development is impacting the headwater areas. If it's not sufficiently planned it could overwhelm streams and push upland reservoirs upon which the health of many of the degraded watersheds now depend past numerous tipping points explains Andrew McCammon, Executive Director of Ontario Headwaters Institute.

McCammon describes the impact on the watersheds as a multi-pronged assault and points to a few key issues: land use planning that lacks a lens for sustainable communities, buildings, and homes; thirty-year targets for development lands and 400-series highways in the Greenbelt that drive prices up and farmers away; provincial policies that expedite virgin aggregate extraction over natural heritage, farming, conservation, and recycling; an absence of cumulative monitoring and reporting—even where required when fundamental land use planning acts are amended; and municipal debates about growth, commerce, and taxes, with almost no thought as to where the excrement is going.

With the wastewater treatment plant in Erin, the temperature of the effluent from the plant may kill the local brook trout and that those living downstream were not adequately consulted, claims McCammon.

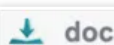
McCammon points to recent efforts to have a federal impact assessments done on the wastewater treatment plants thanks to local groups with a petition to the House of Commons initiated by Jenni LeForestier—which was supported by MP Kyle Seebach—that received over 1,700 signatures; a request to the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada and Wilkinson sent by five local and provincial organizations forming the Coalition for the West Credit River; and a petition from the Coalition for the West Credit River that has obtained 21,000 signatures to protect the river from the effluent.

"We're leading a rally for what we call the downstreamers," said McCammon. "They're downstream of where the effluent will be put into the river, and they've been alienated by the Town and Council. What we're trying to do is rally with the downstreamers to sign a petition that will be going to the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada and the federal minister (Wilkinson). We only have a few days to send in our comments to increase the volume of noise with the federal minister."

For those looking to help with the cause before Wilkinson makes his decision on May 26, McCammon encourages they fill out a form at ontarioheadwaters.ca/iaac81434 and write to their local MP, Mayor, and Councillors, and he asks they sign the petition at change.org/p/residents-on-the-west-credit-river-watershed-cut-the-crap-keep-the-credit.



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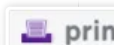
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