

Watersheds Canada warns lakes need protection



Watersheds Canada's Barbara King reminds council of its need to protect area lakes and freshwater ecosystems. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

"You're not a rich municipality but you have a lot of responsibility for how you manage your natural resources within your township ? so there's a lot of pressure," said executive director of Watersheds Canada Barbara King during a special meeting of Hastings Highlands council June 28. "You have a really unique opportunity up here. You're fairly pristine right now. You don't have some of the same development that has occurred in other areas."

King visited council to discuss what municipalities can do to protect freshwater ecosystems before it's too late. Lake eutrophication in the US costs up to \$5.7 billion including preventing the loss of biodiversity, fishing and boating tourism, drinking water infrastructure and property values.

King described Watersheds Canada as a grassroots organization that focuses on working with landowners, community organizations and municipalities to get ahead of damaging factors to lakes such as those surrounding the area. Many of the presentations she does in Eastern Ontario are already about reversing damage Hastings Highlands hasn't seen yet.

"I grew up on the water," said King. "The last 30 years, watching how things have changed up there ? they're no longer little cottages, they're now mansions that are developed right on the shorelines? They've got invasive species. You can't jump off the dock anymore and just swim. I grew up swimming that lake and not touching a weed. Things have really changed."

According to King, managing freshwater ecosystems is extremely complicated. Each ecosystem is impacted by different influences. Some are in agricultural areas, or in areas with forestry industry. Others can have fisheries and hatcheries. There might also be different lake associations involved in an area ? each might debate lake protection standards ? or a conservation authority to work with.

"The Canadian framework is a mess? There's no real standardization of our approach to protecting freshwater. We've got out of date legislation. We have policies that are not enacted. We've got cuts, a lot of cuts that happen, and a lot of downloading of responsibilities to the municipalities," said King. "So much development happens at the lake and river level. It's really critical that how that development happens that it's done in a manner that allows for the lakes to be sustainable over the long term. It's kind of looking at that net environmental gain."

King suggested that developers would be looking to Hastings Highlands and surrounding area as popular cottage country areas fill up.

"There's no clear definition of what a lake at capacity is," said King, suggesting the municipality should look to set models and

bylaws to ensure developers work responsibly. One such bylaw could be limiting the percentage of development for a single property or setting guidelines for shoreline vegetation.

King recommended a 30-metre buffer of natural vegetation from waterfronts to balance water nutrient levels and provide areas for lake species to thrive. Ninety per cent of all lake life is born and reared in the first 10 to 15 metres from shore. Thick vegetation, as opposed to developing a lawn to the edge of a property, helps filter storm run off into lakes.

A slide in King's presentation noted development couldn't be reversed once it was done. The same goes for damage done by improper development.

?The developers have a lot of money and they will target areas? If you leave yourself vulnerable they will take you to the Ontario Municipal Board ? if they want to develop waterfront lots,? said King, noting her husband is an environmental consultant and calling development talks ?scary.? ?A lot of the Muskokas are developed. Eastern Ontario is getting pretty full and people will move looking for that pristine lake to develop.?

King also wanted to talk about invasive species. She noted invasive species such as zebra mussels have already been spotted in some area lakes but they hadn't been confirmed. She recommended washing stations and signage to remind people to be careful of spreading invasive species.

?When you're in Saskatchewan, for example, they're trying to stop them from coming in their region. They have roadside signs that say stop the invasion? You're towing a boat and you're going to put your boat into one of our lakes from another lake that has zebra mussels. You need to stop, inspect your boat, wash your boat, and make sure that you're protecting our waters.?

It's as easy to spread invasive species as to buy a used dock from one lake and move it to another. Some species, such as Eurasian watermilfoil spread in fragments ? attached to a boat propeller for example. These species change water chemistry and destroy freshwater ecosystems.

King's presentation drove home the point that lake planning is all about community ? working together to ensure lakes are the same today for the generations that come later.

For more information, to donate to Watersheds Canada efforts, or to learn more about being a responsible waterfront owner, such as having your property assessed to see how it can better sustain freshwater ecosystems, visit watersheds.ca.]

- Sarah Sobanski