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Cataraqui Source Protection Committee Commemorates 20th Anniversary of Walkerton Tragedy with Reminder of Importance of Protecting Our Water at Its Source

Kingston – The members of the Cataraqui Source Protection Committee join with the members of other source water protection organizations throughout Ontario to mark the two decades that have passed since the water contamination disaster that led to a number of deaths, and many other lives irreparably harmed in the Walkerton area.

The importance of commemorating this event hits home with greater urgency and significance as the world is currently in the midst of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Both it, and the Walkerton tragedy reinforce the important role that our health care sector, and its partners within the conservation and environmental movement have in ensuring the safety and security of our drinking water, and the general health and well being of all residents of the Province of Ontario.

The pandemic is a reminder of the importance of the mandate the Cataraqui Source Protection Committee, Cataraqui Conservation and local municipal governments have in protecting municipal drinking water through source protection measures, to ensure the spectre of Walkerton never rises again.

Sometime on or around May 12, 2000, the drinking water supply in Walkerton, Ontario, a primarily rural community, became contaminated by *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 and *Campylobacter jejuni* bacteria. Seven people died and more than 2,300 people became ill. Many people continue to have adverse health effects from this tragic event. An independent commission was appointed to investigate. Subsequently known as the Walkerton Inquiry, it was led by Dennis R. O'Connor, a Justice of the Court of Appeal for Ontario.

The Commission made recommendations to improve “ ... all aspects of the drinking water system in Ontario, including the protection of drinking water sources; the treatment, distribution, and monitoring of drinking water; the operation and management of water systems; and the full range of functions involved in the provincial regulatory role.”

The tragedy at Walkerton was not the only example of the need for protection of our water sources and a multi-barrier approach – but it was a catalyst. The Ontario Government passed the Clean Water Act in 2006 to regulate the monitoring and protection of the province’s drinking water at its source. In collaboration with municipalities and various ministries the Cataraqui Source Protection Area was created.

A Source Water Protection Committee was established to represent public, municipal, industry and agriculture sectors, with the task of developing a science-based Source Protection Plan for our area.

Under the Drinking Water Source Protection Program, Cataraqui Conservation works with local municipalities and stakeholders to ensure clean, safe and sustainable drinking water sources are protected, throughout the Cataraqui Source Protection Area. There are 10 watersheds that make up the Cataraqui Region, comprising thousands of rivers and streams and upwards of 175 lakes. Coupled with the Frontenac Islands, the local Source Protection Area includes all these water bodies, as well as the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario.

Cataraqui Conservation

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The success of the Cataraqui Source Protection Plan thus far has been because of the co-operation between Cataraqui Conservation, local municipalities, other environmental groups and the general public. By taking a comprehensive and wholistic approach, and by applying leading edge science, the goal continues to be to ensure that all residents have access to safe drinking water.

Clean, sustainable and abundant drinking water is important to all of us. The Cataraqui Source Protection Committee continues to strive for improved source water protection for everyone as per Justice O'Connor's recommendations to ensure safe drinking water sources.

By protecting this valuable resource at its source, we are ensuring the health and vitality of our ecosystem, contributing to the well being of area residents for generations to come, and to ensure that tragedies, such as those that afflicted the Walkerton area, never happen again.

For more information about the Cataraqui Source Protection Area visit www.cleanwatercataraqui.ca

By: John Williamson, Chair, Cataraqui Source Protection Committee.
On behalf of the Cataraqui Source Protection Committee and Cataraqui Conservation

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