



Oak Ridges Moraine Protection Policies Subverted for Solar Project Approval

The first Renewal Energy Approval (REA) on the Oak Ridges Moraine and Protected Countryside of the Greenbelt Plan areas has been granted to Canadian Solar. While supportive of the Green Energy Act (GEA) and associated Feed-in-Tariff (FIT) program, concerned residents are outraged that approval was contingent on a significant reduction of setbacks from natural features such as significant woodlands, headwater streams and groundwater discharge areas.

In fact, these concerns are not limited to this project. In reviewing the Ganaraska Wind project, there were over 100 references to either the removal or reduction of a setback regulated under the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. The Settlers Landing Project located in Bethany, Ontario would not be possible had setbacks, required for every other type of development on the moraine, been as rigorously adhered to for this energy project. Groundwater studies, a key requirement for all types of projects located on the moraine, are not required for wind or solar projects. Setbacks are not being maintained, significant and sensitive natural features are not being considered and reports not being produced.

"It's time to take a step back and re-examine the whole REA process if it can't approve large scale energy projects under established environment-first policies like the Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenbelt Plans," says Cindy Sutch, Director, Save the Oak Ridges Moraine Coalition (STORM). "We need to pull together top hydro geologists and ecologists in Ontario to examine where we're heading and explore the impact of these exemptions. The Oak Ridges Moraine provides drinking water directly to 250,000 residents – we need solid science and better knowledge before we start bulldozing this sacred landscape."

After four years of the Green Energy Act and FIT program, it's alarming that the green energy industry and REA developers have not been held to the same standards expected of other industries, businesses, and urban developers etc. Environmental setbacks are an established and integral component of ecosystem planning and protection and are necessary for health and safety, prevention of loss of life and losses to business and restoring and building ecological integrity.

The GEA and subsequent amendments have seriously eroded the environmental review process to the point that it has become a meaningless exercise. To that end, the Township of Scugog and Jacquie Visconti, on behalf of her family and neighbours, have been granted a hearing before the Environmental Review Tribunal to seek answers to their concerns about exemptions to established environmental protection. "Local residents have expressed their concerns about the potential damage to the Oak Ridges Moraine. These concerns have been sent to Canadian Solar, MPPs, the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ministry of the Environment, the Premier, and posted in the Environmental Registry. All of our comments have been ignored. In my opinion the only voice heard was that of the big developer. The Environmental Review Tribunal is our last hope," says resident Jacquie Visconti.

Save The Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM) Coalition supports renewable energy and conservation initiatives. However, the installation of large scale energy infrastructure projects across the Oak Ridges Moraine, has raised a number of questions and concerns. Since 1989, STORM has been working at the local and regional levels to ensure long term protection of the Oak Ridges Moraine. STORM's experience in policy and planning on the Oak Ridges Moraine and its well-developed network were critical to the campaign that saved (legislatively) the Oak Ridges Moraine. In 2001, the Ontario Legislature unanimously enacted the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act and in 2002 the province established the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan.

As such, STORM Coalition respectfully requests that the Province of Ontario halt the awarding of FIT contracts and approval of energy infrastructure projects on the moraine until full environmental assessments are made mandatory. Furthermore, STORM requests that copies of all reports, studies and notice of completions be submitted to STORM for review by its Energy Infrastructure Committee.

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