

# Conserve wetland: it's the law

Time for N.S. government to live up to commitments

By STEPHEN HAWBOLDT

Sat. Jun 19 - 4:54 AM

SPRING in rural Nova Scotia is a feast for all our senses. The nearly constant chorus of frogs punctuated with the beep of a woodcock or the whinny of the snipe is the main course of this spring banquet. The fountainhead for this explosion of life is the large and small fresh and salt wetlands that dot the landscape. Frequently, wetlands are not given credit for all of the critical ecological services they provide for us.

Because the natural processes in wetlands clean water, they have become known as Mother Nature's kidneys. Wetlands also slow runoff, reduce the risk of flooding and provide a wide variety of recreational opportunities. The biodiversity they support is critical to the biosphere's ecological health.

In spite of all of these benefits, wetlands in Nova Scotia are dying by a thousand cuts. Sometimes a whole wetland complex is drained and in-filled for development or agriculture. Other times, it is a small woodland wetland lost to clearcutting. Like compound interest, the cumulative impacts mean wetlands are disappearing at an exponential rate.

This past winter should have brought some badly needed help for our wetlands. A Nova Scotia wetlands conservation policy was to be approved, fulfilling a commitment made by all three political parties when they unanimously passed the Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act in 2007. That policy now seems to be stalled by an apparent lack of decisive political leadership.

The goal of the wetland conservation policy is no net loss of wetlands in the province. In a few situations, very high-value wetlands would be off limits to any disruption. Most wetlands, however, could be compromised but the developer would need to compensate by creating new wetlands elsewhere.

For example, the construction of the new senior citizens' complex in an Annapolis Valley town requires that the developers create a new wetland to compensate for one that is destroyed by the construction. The developers will build a new wetland system adjacent to the Annapolis River.

In addition to being allowed to destroy wetland by compensating, there are many other exemptions, including diked coastal wetlands. Wetlands impacted by roads and other "essential" projects may not be protected.

In spite of these exemptions, this government appears to be balking at implementing the spirit and word of the legislated goal. Sources suggest that they are feeling intense pressure from the those in the forestry industry who want their forested wetlands exempted. They claim that inclusion of these wetlands may curb harvesting practices. Other special interests may also be lobbying.

This is the first real test of the current government on the commitments that all three political parties made when they unanimously endorsed the Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act. The wetland conservation policy was to be in place in 2009.

The first public consultations on this policy were held last year with implementation due this winter. In spite of wide public support, the forestry interests seem to think that they deserve special treatment. Each year, the Nova Scotia government is required to report to the public on progress in achieving the targets under the Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act. The 2009 report will be released on June 23. Further delays in approving the wetlands conservation policy could prove embarrassing.

It is time for all members of the legislative assembly to ensure that the current office holders follow the laws of the province. Wetland conservation is the law.

Stephen Hawboldt is executive director of the Clean Annapolis River Project and was awarded the 2005 Canada Environmental Gold Metal for Habitat Restoration and Rehabilitation.