

Protecting our environment to improve health for all

Do you agree that Ontario must meet or exceed its current greenhouse gas emission targets?

Will you support a carbon pricing system that promotes the province reaching its greenhouse gas emission targets, while protecting vulnerable populations?

RNAO believes dedicated and sustainable revenue sources are needed to pay for the operation and expansion of transit and active transportation across Ontario. Do you agree?

Nurses, health, and climate change

The evidence is clear: climate change is real, and is caused by human activity that increases the volume of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the air.¹ Registered nurses (RN), nurse practitioners (NP), and nursing students are unwavering in their commitment to protecting the health of Ontarians. Nurses are concerned about climate change because of its serious environmental and health implications. We already see weather disturbances causing severe population dislocation (e.g., drought in the Horn of Africa, hurricanes in the Caribbean Sea). Climate change also affects the health of Ontarians in many ways:^{2 3 4}

- Temperature-extremes cause more illness and death from heart attacks, heat stroke, and hypothermia
- Flooding and wildfires also cause illness and fatalities
- Vector-borne diseases like West Nile and Lyme Disease are spreading into Ontario because of milder winters
- Air quality deteriorates because heat promotes smog formation and because of more wildfires. That in turn increases respiratory and heart diseases, allergies and asthma. The greater heat also promotes higher pollen counts, which also is bad for asthma.

By fighting climate change, we are not merely protecting the environment; we are protecting people's health. We do that by slowing climate change, and also through the many health co-benefits of action on climate change. For example, when we cut automobile emissions, we reduce greenhouse gases – and we also reduce harmful smog.

We also fight for environmental justice, because the most vulnerable are usually those who have contributed the least to climate change.

Ontario's climate change plan

Through the 2000s, Ontario took significant steps to reduce its carbon emissions, producing multiple benefits. Closing the province's coal-fired power plants, for instance, not only reduced

carbon emissions, it also improved air quality. The number of smog days in Ontario went from 53 in 2005 to zero in 2014 and 2015.⁵ Another example is the movement towards more walkable and bikeable communities, which reduces emissions from motor vehicles and promotes physical exercise.

As part of these efforts, Ontario also set ambitious but necessary GHG reduction targets of 15 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020, 37 per cent by 2030 and 80 per cent by 2050.⁶

The recently-elected government has yet to present a plan to tackle climate change. The government's pre-election platform promised to scrap any carbon pricing and challenge in the Supreme Court of Canada any attempt by the federal government to impose a carbon tax on Ontario.^{7 8}

Since taking power in June, the government has renamed the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change to the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks, dropping the reference to climate change;⁹ announced that Cabinet's first act would be to cancel Ontario's cap-and-trade program;¹⁰ revoked the cap-and-trade regulation and banned all trading of emission allowances effective July 3;¹¹ cancelled all programs funded by cap-and-trade revenues; wound down the Green Ontario fund;¹² cancelled and are winding down more than 750 renewable energy contracts;¹³ and will keep the Pickering Nuclear Generating Station open until 2024.¹⁴

In July, the government introduced legislation (Bill 4)¹⁵ to end the cap-and-trade program in Ontario.¹⁶ Through a cap-and-trade system, a set number ('cap') of permits to emit carbon are auctioned off, in line with emissions targets. This legislation would repeal the *Climate Change Mitigation and Low-Carbon Economy Act, 2016*,¹⁷ which means repealing Ontario's emission reduction targets.¹⁸ In a break with normal practice, the government elected not to hold public consultations on the revocation of cap and trade on the grounds that the election was substantially equivalent to a consultation¹⁹ – this controversial decision has been challenged by legal experts, as the Environmental Bills of Rights mandates the participation of Ontario residents in the making of environmentally significant decisions by the government.^{20 21 22} On September 11, 2018, Environmental and law groups sued Ontario for failing to consult the public before cancelling the cap-and-trade program.^{23 24} Within three hours, the government posted Bill 4 on the Environmental Registry for public comment.^{25 26} On September 20, the government introduced legislation to repeal the Green Energy Act, an act that promotes green energy.^{27 28} These actions signal that climate change is a low priority for our government. Without a climate change plan, we are putting at risk the health and safety of our communities.

Carbon pricing

Economists generally agree that taxing pollution helps to reduce it. For example, pricing carbon emissions can help meet GHG reduction targets. A strong price signal will promote necessary behaviour changes to support the environment. As noted above, the Ontario government has ended Ontario's carbon pricing program, cap and trade. The federal government intends to impose a federal backstop carbon tax by January 1, 2019 on provinces that do not have an adequate carbon pricing system.²⁹ Ontario has also signaled it will oppose any such attempt by the federal government.^{30 31}

In the event of a carbon tax, RNAO urges that it be set at a rate that helps ensure the province meets its GHG emission targets, and that it be as inclusive as possible. Whatever the carbon pricing mechanism, the revenue must be used to help fund GHG reduction efforts and protect vulnerable populations. Revenues must be managed transparently with strong public oversight.

Transit and active transportation

Automobiles are a major source of pollution, particularly in urban environments. They also cause congestion on our roadways, which costs Ontarians billions of dollars in time, vehicle operating costs, accidents, emissions, and lost economic opportunities.³² Yet many people in urban areas have no choice but to drive, with public transit options inadequate and opportunities for active transportation like biking and walking undeveloped or unsafe.

The Big Move is the regional transportation plan developed in 2008 by Metrolinx,³³ which focused on transforming transit in the GTHA. The plan was reviewed in 2013 by the Anne Golden panel,³⁴ which urged the province to develop substantial new dedicated revenue streams to pay for the next wave of transit infrastructure, and to align the Big Move with the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The panel also recommended \$300 million funding for a kick-start program to deliver immediate visible improvements in transit service.³⁵

The Big Move was also supported by the medical officers of health for the GTHA in their 2014 report on designing healthier transportation systems and healthier cities.³⁶ The report concluded that better community design and implementing The Big Move could prevent 338 premature deaths every year by increasing physical activity, reducing harmful vehicle emissions and reducing the staggering cost of congestion.³⁷ It recommended Ontario provide long-term transit funding, work with Metrolinx and the municipalities to implement and optimize access to transportation options, and change government policies to better support active transportation and public transit.

The provincial (\$31 billion), municipal (\$1.9 billion) and federal (\$6.5 billion) governments have since stepped up with transit capital funding.^{38 39} This is a significant step forward, but another \$28.8 billion⁴⁰ is required to complete the construction of the rapid transit expansion for the GTHA under The Big Move. There has also been a recent scaling back of Metrolinx rapid transit plans,⁴¹ and a recent report put the annual net funding gap for rapid transit construction and operation at over \$2 billion.⁴²

The previous government devoted part of the proceeds from the sale of Hydro One to transit, but this is not a sustainable strategy. As Ontario's financial accountability officer pointed out, it secures some money up-front, but foregoes more in the future, leaving a net loss.⁴³ RNAO cautioned against further privatizing Hydro One because of this revenue loss, and because of the dangers of turning Hydro One over to private interests.⁴⁴

The current government has maintained commitments to a number of the Metrolinx projects and also proposes adding \$5 billion in new subway funding. One concern is that three of the four proposed projects (Scarborough subway, Sheppard and Eglinton Crosstown) do not have the ridership to justify the cost. Second, the amount of money committed is inadequate to deliver the amount of infrastructure promised.⁴⁵ Third, the severity of the government's proposed revenue

cuts (e.g., \$2 billion per year from cap and trade) raise the question of whether the PC transit commitments can be met.

RNAO's ENVIRONMENT ASKS

- Develop a climate change plan that at a minimum meets Ontario's legislated GHG reduction targets of 15 percent below 1990 levels by 2020, 37 percent by 2030 and 80 percent by 2050.
- Support the federal initiative to impose a price on carbon across the country, and ensure that the price is sufficient to lead Ontario to meet its GHG emission targets.
 - Direct carbon pricing revenues to GHG reduction and to mitigate the impact on vulnerable populations affected by higher carbon prices
 - Manage revenues transparently with strong public oversight
 - Develop a complementary suite of programs targeting all emitting sectors
- On the issue of transportation, RNAO urges the province to take all necessary steps to:
 - Work with federal and municipal partners to ensure dedicated and sustainable revenue sources to pay for ongoing operation and substantial expansion of transit and active transportation in Ontario
 - Support cost-effective and expeditious delivery of those expansions, implemented by transparent governance and informed expert opinion
 - Avoid resorting to public asset sales like the privatization of Hydro One to fund transit expansions

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- ¹ GHG concentrations have risen above 400 parts per million (ppm), from 280 ppm at the start of the industrial era. GHG concentrations far exceed those at any point in the last 800,000 years. As a consequence, average global temperatures are about 1.5° C higher than in preindustrial times, which is the threshold that the international Paris climate agreement agreed should not be exceeded. In turn, massive climate effects are already being felt: the oceans are warming and becoming more acidic; the sea level has risen; ice sheets are shrinking rapidly; the thickness and area of sea ice are dropping sharply; virtually all glaciers are retreating at unprecedented rates; snow cover is falling; and extreme weather events are on the rise. All these effects combine to accelerate the warming of the planet and threaten to take it to a tipping point, where for example thawing of the permafrost releases vast quantities of methane – a powerful GHG.
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- ⁸ This is in contrast to the PC Party's 2017 platform, which promised to replace Ontario's carbon-pricing system (cap and trade) with a carbon tax.
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- ¹² Ontario. (2018). *Ontario Introduces Legislation to End Cap and Trade Carbon Tax Era in Ontario*. July 25. Retrieved from <https://news.ontario.ca/ene/en/2018/07/ontario-introduces-legislation-to-end-cap-and-trade-carbon-tax-era-in-ontario.html>.

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