

We need action to protect our waterways

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It has unfortunately become a regular summer ritual in Prince Edward Island. Government hosts a huge event expected to boost tourism numbers (Regis and Kelly, Will and Kate) and then dead fish show up to discourage the very tourists we continuously hope to attract. Those dead fish are signals to all that something is very wrong with the way we are treating our fragile Island ecosystem. And the detrimental impacts go far beyond the streams and rivers. In 2011, the three fish kills that we know of have led to thousands of dead fish in our waterways. This destruction of our waterways and wildlife — what author Paul Hawken calls our “natural capital” — will continue until public concern and outrage are so strong that they force government to act responsibly. The provincial government bears the brunt of the responsibility for this intolerable situation. We don’t just ask the public to drive at safe speeds, we legislate speed limits and enforce the limits with fines. The province must legislate and support farming practices that will dramatically reduce the amount of topsoil, pesticides and nitrates that enter our waterways. This would include a longer mandatory crop rotation free of loopholes; a legislated plan to reduce pesticide use; increased buffer zones along our waterways; restrictions on the spreading of manure during the winter months; a ban on late fall plowing; minimum standards for organic matter in soils; and substantially increased support for farmers making the transition to organic agriculture. The provincial government has been working in all these areas and deserves some credit for its efforts. Unfortunately, as the fish kills and eutrophication zones that are turning up in our waterways each year make clear, these efforts are falling well short of what is needed. Our provincial leaders are not the only ones that need to step up to the plate. The City of Charlottetown is having a serious impact on the quality of water due to regular overflows from the sewage treatment plant. In addition, the city withdraws about 18 million litres of water a day from the Winter River, far more than the natural system can recharge. The federal government continues to maintain a low profile on this issue, when it could be taking action to stop pollution using fines and our court system. Under the federal Fisheries Act, it is illegal to allow the discharge into waterways of any material hazardous to fish health, including topsoil, pesticides and sewage. Especially when it comes to enforcement issues, both Environment Canada and Fisheries and Oceans seem to have less and less presence within our province. All Islanders have a responsibility to ensure that our ecosystems are healthy. While many farmers are turning towards organic agriculture, it is still a small minority. Consumers need to show support for good farming practices by paying a fair price for food grown in sustainable agricultural systems. Governments at all levels need to set good examples for the public and also to support improvements in the quality of our environment. This issue has been around for decades and has been endlessly studied. Fish kills and dead zones in waterways are a reflection of an unhealthy ecosystem. They also have a destructive effect on tourism, the recreational fishery, shellfish industries and agriculture — all important components of our Island economy. It is time for the public to demand that all levels of government take decisive action to protect the environmental health of our waterways. There is no other way