

Climate change czar aims to paint province green



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Roller-bladers skate alongside Toronto's Lakeshore Blvd. during a smog alert in this July 2006 file photo.

Earth Hour initiative will see 'guerrilla outfit' set up to ensure Ontario government keeps its promises

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Premier Dalton McGuinty has appointed a climate change czar to lead Ontario's fight against global warming.

Hugh MacLeod's job will be to make sure the government's numerous environmental plans – from banning conventional light bulbs to phasing out coal-fired power plants – are actually carried out.

MacLeod has already quietly started setting up Ontario's Climate Change Secretariat but the provincial government had been planning to announce it on March 29 – when people around the world turn off lights for Earth Hour to symbolize their commitment to protecting the environment.

MacLeod, 60, isn't a hemp-wearing environmentalist, but a man of business with a track record in the health-care field for bringing diverse groups together with government to work for change.

The government's action plan on climate change, released last summer, is about pushing Ontario to do what it can to mitigate the environmental crisis.

Environmental groups have criticized the government for talking a lot, but not delivering much on climate change.

"The secretariat is the premier's recognition that you can have the loftiest climate change goals but if you want to get anything done you have to have a strong focus and strong leadership," a government source said.

MacLeod will hold "climate change results" meetings every five weeks with the premier, senior politicians and bureaucrats to outline what has been done to date and what has to happen next, the source said.

It's a strategy that has worked elsewhere. British Columbia, which has a Climate Action Secretariat, came out with a green provincial budget two weeks ago that included North America's first full-fledged carbon tax.

"(The B.C. secretariat) was central to giving climate change the priority it had in the budget," said Julia Langer, global threats director at the World Wildlife Federation Canada.

It can be a "crack the whip" sort of role if a particular ministry isn't moving on something, but more often than not, climate change issues cut across many ministries and a person managing, from above it all, can make sure everyone is pulling in the same direction.

This is just what Ontario needs, Langer said.

"We had a climate plan announced in the summer and, from a tangible perspective, what's emerged from that? It's bits and pieces and what we need is a massive scale up," she said referring to a series of government announcements in June, July and August about various initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"(A secretariat) has the ability to knock some heads together and make things happen because often they're all off on their own little planets and orbits and they don't necessarily work toward the same goal," Langer said.

While the idea of a climate change secretariat is welcome, Langer said she'll wait to see Ontario's results before cheering too loudly.

"The clock is tick, tick, ticking. We have a climate change crisis on our hands," she said.

By end of April, the secretariat is expected to be up and running.

It's not about setting up a big bureaucracy though. It will be "a small guerrilla outfit with strong vision that can drive through ministries," a source said.

MacLeod reports directly to McGuinty and, as such, has the clout of being the premier's man.

"This is about embedding a climate change culture at the heart of government. This is also about innovating the way we do things in government," the source said.

McGuinty came to know MacLeod through regular health results meetings where MacLeod, the team leader, reported on progress in reducing hospital wait times for some surgeries and cancer treatments.

As head of the climate change secretariat, MacLeod's top priorities will be making sure Ontario's coal-fired power plants close by 2014, which is already well after the original Liberal promise to close them by 2007; protect large-scale areas for caribou habitat in the Boreal Forest; and build more rapid transit, the source said.

These are key planks in the Liberal plan to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change by 6 per cent below 1990 levels by 2014, 15 per cent by 2020 and 80 per cent by 2050.

Ontario's coal-fired power plants are the largest producers of greenhouse gases and closing them by 2014 will reduce the province's annual emissions by 30 megatonnes, according to the government.

Ontario's northern Boreal Forest stores vast amounts of carbon and provides a buffer for species to adapt to changing climate, but it is under threat from industry.

Each year, millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide are released through logging.

The province's transit plan, MoveOntario 2020, includes 902 kilometres of new or improved rapid transit.

It will take 300 million annual car trips off GTA roads, cut smog and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 10 megatonnes by 2020, according to the government.