



Press Release

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University Marketing & Communications

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Niagara River water quality improved significantly over last 25 years: policy brief

Long-standing pollution in the Niagara River and its many effects have been reported ever since Great Lakes-focused cleanup efforts began in 1987.

Although water quality has improved significantly, toxins continue to be present in the surrounding ecosystem, resulting in loss of fish and wildlife habitats, degradation of water organisms, restrictions on eating fish, and beach postings.

These are the major findings of “The Niagara River Remedial Action Plan: 25 Years of Environmental Restoration,” produced by Brock University’s Niagara Community Observatory.

Degradation of the Niagara River dates back to the 1970s when approximately 700 chemical plants, steel mills, oil refineries, and other industries discharged more than 250 million gallons of wastewater into the Niagara River each day.

As health disasters such as Love Canal began to surface, public pressure on governments in Canada and the United States led to Remedial Action Plans (RAPs) being developed and implemented in 43 Areas of Concern within the Great Lakes Basin. Two RAPs have been developed for the Niagara River Area of Concern -- one in Ontario and the other in New York State.

The Niagara River (Ontario) RAP is in the third and final stage of the RAP process.

Major accomplishments of the Niagara River (Ontario) RAP include:

- * 99 per cent reduction of discharges from Ontario municipal and industrial sources to the Niagara River
- * the cleanup of contaminated sediments at Chippawa Creek in the Welland River and near the now-defunct Atlas Steels plant in Welland
- * the development and implementation of an Administrative Controls Protocol for Lyons Creek East, which prevents sediments from being disturbed in the area
- * a special wastewater treatment facility in Niagara Falls
- * major reductions in toxic chemicals in the Niagara River
- * three out of four public beaches located in the Niagara River Area of Concern are meeting water quality targets for safe swimming

But much still remains to be done, says the policy brief:

- * six concerns (called “Beneficial Use Impairments”) remain: restrictions on fish consumption; degradation of fish and wildlife populations; degradation of benthos (sediment-dwelling organisms); eutrophication or undesirable algae; loss of fish and wildlife habitat; the closing of some beaches
- * habitat restoration and many water quality improvement projects are on-going to address eutrophication (high nutrients-low oxygen) in the Welland River watershed
- * monitoring and assessment is underway to determine progress in reaching targets for delisting the Area of Concern
- * investigations are underway to identify beach pollution

“One of the most significant challenges facing the Niagara River RAP [Remedial Action Plan] is the ability to convey the importance of its long-term vision in a world that demands instant results,” says the policy brief.

“While pollutant concentrations in the Niagara River have declined steadily in recent years, the complete removal of pollutants from the surrounding ecosystem will require many more years to achieve,” says the brief.

Copies of the policy brief can be found at: www.brocku.ca/niagara-community-observatory

For RAP updates and reports visit: www.npca.ca/watershed-management/niagara-river-remedial-action-plan

For more info and follow-up interviews:

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BACKGROUNDER - Niagara River water facts:

- * 58 kilometres long, flowing between Canada and the U.S.
- * the Niagara River is an integral part of the largest freshwater system on earth: the Great Lakes basin (connects Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, carries water from Lakes Superior, Huron, and Michigan)
- * average flow rate of 5,700 cubic meters per second
- * accounts for 83 percent of the water flowing into Lake Ontario
- * in the Niagara region alone, about 130,000 people rely on the Niagara River and Lake

Ontario for their drinking water, with millions across Ontario doing so