



Setting Indicators and Targets, and Monitoring Ontario's Environment 2020 Value-for-Money Audit

Why We Did This Audit

- This audit arose from our 2019 Overview of Environmental Issues in Ontario, which found that the province does not issue comprehensive reports on the state of the environment or progress in achieving environmental targets and objectives.
- In reviewing information on environmental reporting, it became apparent that ministries also lack the necessary processes for setting targets to achieve environmental goals, and to ensure that data is collected in a consistent, comparable and useful way.

Why It Matters

- Setting effective, time-bound targets is necessary for driving and assessing progress in meeting broad, long-term environmental goals.
- Environmental monitoring is critical to knowing whether the environment is getting better or worse, and whether environmental goals are being met. Monitoring also provides information for designing and improving environmental management programs, allocating resources and confirming compliance.

What We Found

- The Environment Ministry's air and water monitoring programs are extensive, and respond to legislative and regulatory requirements, inter-jurisdictional agreements and other commitments.
- The Environment Ministry, Natural Resources Ministry and Agriculture Ministry have not set targets in some important environmental areas, such as invasive and at-risk species, soil health and water conservation. In addition, the Agriculture Ministry cancelled its targets and its plan to improve pollinator health.
- Although the ministries are required to set annual performance indicators and targets to measure performance, many indicators and targets are not shared with the public. Moreover, few performance indicators relate to the state of Ontario's natural resources or the environmental sustainability of agriculture.
- Some established targets lack time frames while others lack evidence to support the basis for the target.
- Despite a 2012 commitment, the Natural Resources Ministry has not developed an integrated, broad-scale program for monitoring biodiversity. Likewise, pollinators to crops and wild plants are important, with over one-third of our food coming from insect-pollinated plants. However, Ontario has no comprehensive, long-term wild pollinator monitoring program.
- The Environment Ministry does not have a database to track the assignment, implementation and progress of actions to protect and recover Ontario's at-risk species. As a result, monitoring protocols had not been developed for 12 of a sample of 16 endangered species (or 75% of them) despite being identified as a high priority.
- Monitoring in Ontario's provincial parks and conservation reserves is variable and inconsistent because the Environment Ministry provides no specific direction.
- The Agriculture Ministry recognizes the need to improve tracking changes in the health of agricultural soils, but little progress has been made to implement foundational actions in its 2018 Soil Health Strategy.
- Few of the ministries' monitoring programs have comprehensive, standardized monitoring protocols to ensure data is collected in a consistent way that allows for valid analysis. Moreover, few programs have performance measurement frameworks, program evaluations and data management plans to ensure the effectiveness of programs and the integrity, security and accessibility of collected data.

Conclusions

- The Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture ministries do not have effective systems and processes to ensure the effective, long-term monitoring of Ontario's environment, natural resources and agriculture, or progress toward meeting legislated and policy goals.
- The three ministries have not set targets to achieve goals in several areas, hindering the ministries' and public's ability to gauge progress. Moreover, some targets that are set do not have time frames and supporting rationales, and many performance indicators and targets are not made public and change over time.
- Monitoring is inadequate in several areas, such as biodiversity, wild pollinators, protected areas, soil health and species at risk. Additionally, several monitoring programs lack standardized, documented processes for collecting, analyzing and managing data.
- Monitoring programs lack requirements to have performance measurement frameworks or undergo program evaluations to ensure that they are effective at meeting monitoring goals.

Read the report at www.auditor.on.ca