

Report slams water waste

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The London Free Press, July 4, 2010 4:09pm

A new report says Ontario residents waste much of the water drawn from the Great Lakes and the mayors of two lakeside communities agree.

The report from Toronto-based Environmental Defence says Ontario communities waste more than 580 billion litres of water annually, enough to fill 236,000 Olympic swimming pools.

The waste is blamed on the use of outdated toilets, showerheads and washing machines as well as lawn watering and leaky municipal water and sewage systems.

The report says 213 billion litres could be saved just by converting all households to high efficiency toilets, roughly equivalent to the annual water use of the City of Toronto.

"It's like flushing money down the toilet while draining our rivers, lakes and wetlands," said Mike Layton, deputy outreach director for Environmental Defence.

Goderich Mayor Deb Shewfelt said southwestern Ontario communities are complacent about water usage because they are surrounded by the Great Lakes.

He said Goderich town council is committed to installing water meters in all homes and businesses – a move that should cut consumption by 20%.

"When we started talking about it years ago people said 'Are you nuts? You're beside a lake.' But that thinking has changed," said Shewfelt, who is also a director of the Ontario Municipal Water Association.

The report says about 13% of the water used by Canadian municipal systems is lost through leakage and the loss can be as high as 30 % in older systems.

Shewfelt said municipalities need help from senior governments to repair and upgrade leaky old municipal water systems.

"Because it is underground, it's not very sexy. It's easier to build a sparkling new rec centre," said Shewfelt.

Sarnia Mayor Mike Bradley says he welcomes any report focusing on water conservation.

"Canadians don't have a respect for water. We are still treating the Great Lakes like a toilet bowl," said Bradley.

He said Sarnia city council recently boosted water rates by 19% and will put the revenue back into the water system.

Bradley agrees that water and sewage systems are often one of the first items to get cut when cities try to pare tax increases.

Bradley said Ontario residents should get used to a user-pay system to pay for the full cost of water and sewage system, predicting those charges could eventually exceed property taxes.

By the numbers:

27% - Ontario's share of total Great Lakes water usage

162 billion – litres saved annually by upgrading old washing machines

65 billion – litres saved by low-flow showerheads

138 billion - litres saved by reducing lawn watering and planting drought-resistant plants

Source: Down the Drain report by Environmental Defense