2009



Status Report

of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the House of Commons

Message from the Commissioner

Chapter 1Safety of Drinking Water

Chapter 2
Air Quality Health Index—
Health Canada and Environment Canada



The 2009 Status Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development comprises a Message from the Commissioner and two chapters. The main table of contents is found at the end of this publication.

The Report is available on our website at www.oag-bvg.gc.ca.

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© Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada 2009 Cat. No. FA1-2/2009-0E ISBN 978-1-100-11830-7 To the Honourable Speaker of the House of Commons:

On behalf of the Auditor General of Canada, I have the honour to transmit herewith this Status Report to the House of Commons for 2009, which is to be laid before the House in accordance with the provisions of sections 23(3) of the *Auditor General Act*.

Scott Vaughan Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development

To the reader:

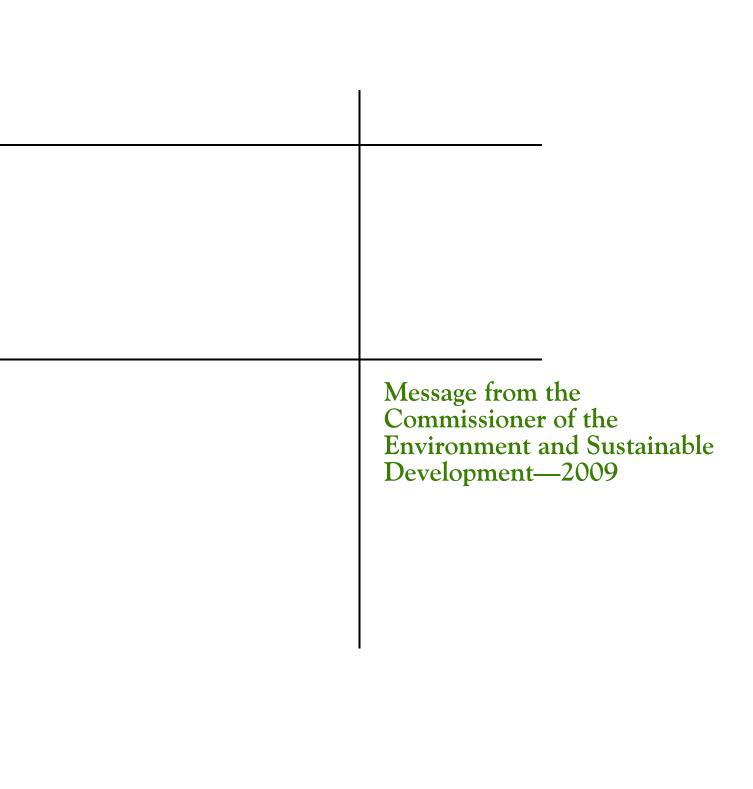
I welcome your comments and suggestions on this Report and other issues related to the environment and sustainable development. I can be reached at the following address:

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Message from the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development—Status Report 2009

This Status Report contains two follow-up chapters on environmental issues that are fundamental to life: the safety of the water we drink and the quality of the air we breathe.

The federal government shares responsibility with other levels of government in helping to safeguard Canada's air and water. The federal role includes measuring air pollutants, regulating cross-border air pollution, and carrying out research on the health impacts of pollutants. In addition, the federal government regulates drinking water in federal facilities and on cross-border public transportation. It also develops science-based guidelines that set important criteria for water quality and that can be used by the provinces and territories, who regulate drinking water within their jurisdictions.

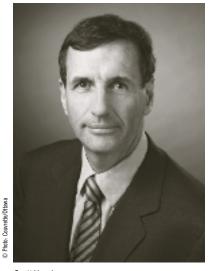
Our chapter on drinking water follows up on our 2005 audit on the safety of drinking water and also includes new work on bottled water. The chapter on the air quality health index examines whether the government has delivered on a commitment made at the 2001 Toronto Smog Summit to develop a Canada-wide air quality index based on health risks. The government reiterated its commitment in 2002 and 2003, in response to petitions submitted through the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development.

Status reports allow us to tell Parliament to what extent the government has met commitments made in response to our previous audit recommendations. I am pleased to report that we found satisfactory progress on both of the environmental issues examined for this report.

Safety of Drinking Water

In 2005, we reported that Health Canada was slow to develop and review its guidelines for the safety of drinking water. At the time, there was a backlog of about 50 guidelines that needed to be reviewed and, if necessary, updated to reflect current science.

We are pleased that the government has taken action to speed up the approval of the Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality and address the backlog.



Scott Vaughan Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development

We are also pleased that Health Canada has promoted the guidance it issued to federal departments in late 2005 on providing safe drinking water at federal facilities.

However, further work is needed in other areas—in particular, bringing regulations up-to-date to ensure safe drinking water on public conveyances, such as aircraft and trains, and in federally regulated transportation hubs, such as airports, as well as clarifying regulations that apply to bottled water.

Air Quality Health Index (AQHI)

The Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) is a tool designed to measure air quality based on levels of air pollutants known to harm human health. Like the UV index, with its 1 to 10 ranking of the sun's ultraviolet radiation, the AQHI—a snapshot of air quality at a given location—is a communication tool that allows Canadians to make informed decisions about their outdoor activities (for example, refraining from jogging) when pollution levels are high.

Our audit found that Environment Canada and Health Canada have made satisfactory progress in meeting their commitment to develop an AQHI, which has been piloted in several locations. We found that the government's approach to consultation could be a model for other programs. For example, the two departments consulted widely with governmental and non-governmental organizations at every stage of this initiative, and most participants said they were satisfied with the consultation process. Many of the groups consulted are custodians of technical information and are also committed to environmental protection.

Another ingredient of success in the government's approach to the Index was its scientific research and testing, which led to the selection of ground-level ozone, fine particulate matter, and nitrogen dioxide as three key pollutants that affect human health and that need to be monitored across Canada.

Health Canada and Environment Canada also developed a formula to ensure that the air quality values in the Index would be consistent across the country and easily understood by Canadians. The Index represents an innovative approach that, when fully operating across the country, will enable Canadians to make informed decisions about the health implications of outdoor activities in their specific locations.

Lessons learned and challenges ahead

The federal government faces a number of challenges related to better integrating the way it manages issues of water safety and air quality. The issues raised in both of these chapters underscore the importance of maintaining scientific capacity in government in order to shape and maintain tools and programs.

The Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) in particular shows the ongoing need for sufficient scientific expertise and capacity in government if it is to serve citizens in a number of areas related to health and the environment.

One of the key lessons learned from decades of environmental and sustainable development policies and reinforced by our audit findings on the AQHI is the benefit of transparency, meaningful public consultations, and the engagement of civil society. The success of even the most technically robust programs can be weakened when they are established without the input of the public they are designed to serve.

Our chapter on the AQHI demonstrates that actively engaging stakeholders in consultation can produce positive results. We are pleased about the government's satisfactory progress in the areas of drinking water safety and the development of an AQHI.

The elements of success identified in these two chapters can form a sound basis for tackling the critical challenges ahead. I hope that parliamentarians find the information in these two chapters useful in their scrutiny of government activities.