

Quarry fight

Wetlands that are home to threatened Jefferson salamander are at stake

By Natalie Pona
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The threatened Jefferson salamander is at the heart of a battle between residents living near the Mount Nemo conservation area in Burlington and a proposed quarry expansion.

The unassuming little amphibian with extremely long toes was one of the reasons the province declared parts of the disputed area a significant wetlands. Residents, who formed Protecting Escarpment Rural Land (PERL), are declaring that a critical victory in the fight over Nelson Aggregate's proposal. The provincial review was prompted by PERL's own report on the expansion's environmental impact.

The Jefferson salamander, a threatened species, is an "indicator species," said David Donnelly, a lawyer for Environmental Defence, a group working with PERL. Its presence shows that the area is "a pristine habitat," he said.

"When you find a salamander, you know you are somewhere special," he said. "We've nicknamed the site salamander heaven."

Dr. James Bogart, a University of Guelph zoologist who has researched the salamanders since 1975, said the ideal for the creatures would be no quarry expansion but added, that's unrealistic.

"Unfortunately, we're in an awkward situation because the Province of Ontario needs gravel and the best place to get gravel is the Niagara Escarpment," he said.

The ministry launched its own review and decided PERL's concerns were founded -- the proposed



Aaron Lynett, Toronto Star

Canadian musician Sarah Harmer looks over a pond at Mount Nemo in Burlington that is part of the habitat for threatened Jefferson salamanders.



expansion included creek headwaters containing 15 wetlands rated "provincially significant in status." That means the quarry won't be allowed to expand into at least 18 hectares of wetlands of the 82-hectare proposed expansion, said Anne-Marie Flanagan, spokeswoman for natural resources minister David Ramsay.

That marks a first for the Niagara Escarpment, which, despite being designated a World Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO, is home to 44 pits and quarries.

"It's a huge victory," said musician Sarah Harmer, who grew up on the escarpment and co-founded PERL. "It's a major blow to the company."

But the snag isn't worrying Nelson Aggregate president Norm Elmhirst. He said he has no plans to abandon the project. The company's application is still under review by the government-led Joint Agency Review Team.

Elmhirst said the pockets of wetland in question are concentrated in a southern part of the proposed expansion site. The quarry can build around them, he said.

"We're still working with the (Ministry of Natural Resources) to develop a final extraction area," Elmhirst said. "That will likely be influenced somewhat by the wetlands decision."

But Harmer doesn't buy it. She said the province's decision will lead to the end of the expansion project. About 40 per cent of the area is taken up by the wetlands and related habitat, she said.

"They have to put on a good face," she said. "They do have a lot at stake."

Harmer's optimism may be unfounded as it would be unusual for a group of residents to win the fight against a quarry in Ontario, said Ric Holt, president of Gravel Watch Ontario. He's been involved in about 100 similar cases, he said.

"(Quarries) usually get their way," he said. "Lobbying is a wonderful thing. It works very well for them and they're very well funded."

The government isn't pushed into rubber-stamping expansions by special-interest groups, said Brian Messerschmidt, manager of the province's Aggregates and Petroleum Resources section. Most are approved because experienced companies make well-researched pitches, he said.

"Because there is such an investment involved in an application, the poorer applications tend to weed themselves out," he said.

The Jefferson salamander

Features: Adult Jefferson salamanders have a grey or brown back, with lighter underparts. Blue flecks may be present on the sides and limbs. Adults can grow to a total length of 200 mm. Larvae resemble miniature adults, but with external gills, and forelimbs develop before hindlimbs. Adults live in the soil or in leaf litter on the forest floor, and are best seen in early spring when they move to woodland ponds to breed. Eggs are laid in clumps attached to underwater vegetation. By midsummer, the larvae lose

their gills and leave the pond.

Range: The Jefferson salamander lives in deciduous forests. Its range is from New England south to Maryland, and west to Illinois. In Canada, it occurs only in Ontario, where it has been reported in about 30 sites.

Threats: This species requires intact deciduous forest with undisturbed forest floor, and breeding ponds that are permanent and unpolluted. It is likely that habitat loss and degradation, caused by urban development and agriculture, are responsible for the decline in this species in southern Ontario.

Today, the Ontario populations are small, isolated pockets each numbering a few hundred individuals.

Small populations are always susceptible to local extinction due to chance events such as floods, fire or other catastrophes.

Source: excerpted from the Royal Ontario Museum and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources

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