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Ontario dropped wastewater testing early, with no plan for feds to step in: documents

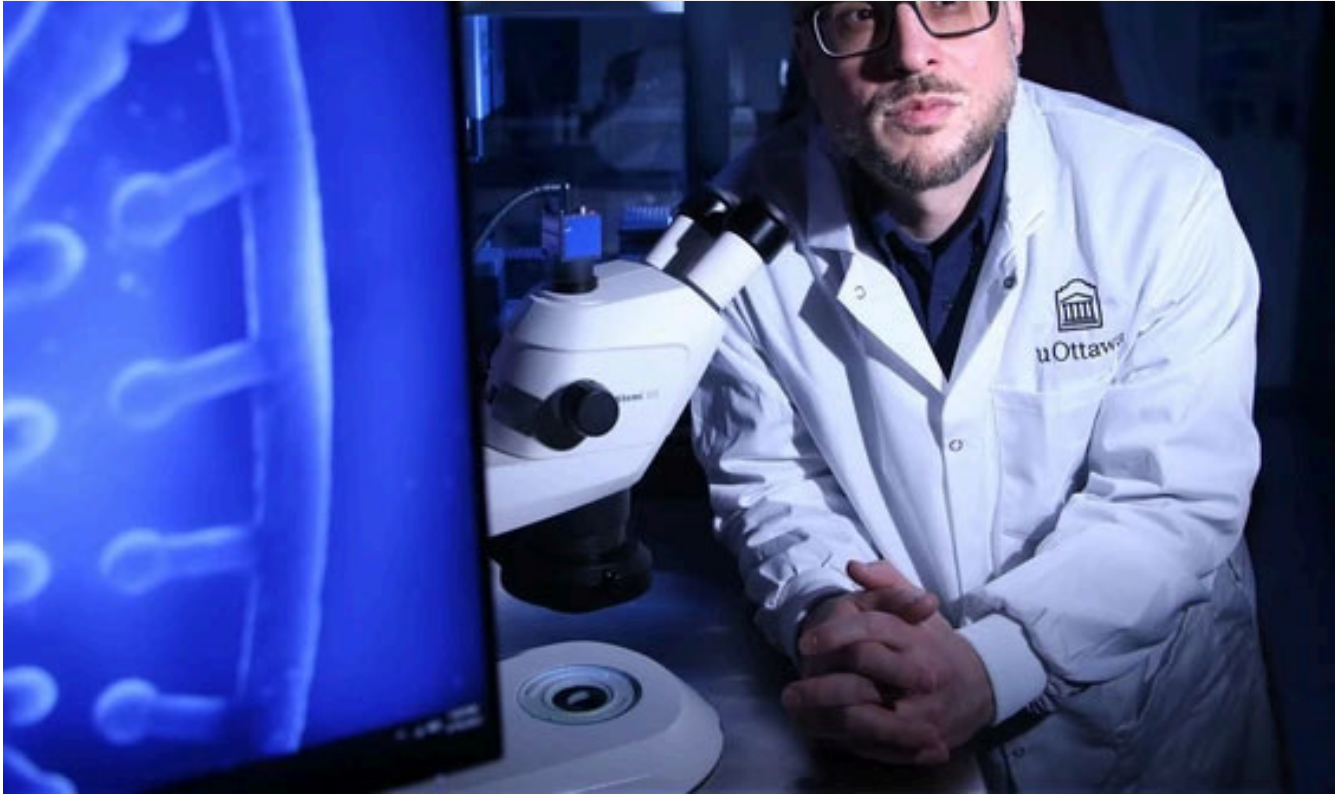
Ontario ended its wastewater testing program earlier than planned this summer, despite having funding in place until the end of September.

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Rob Delatolla, the uOttawa engineering professor who led the movement to begin wastewater testing at the beginning of the pandemic, said he had been shocked to learn funding would file photo end on July 31. Julie Oliver File photo ott

The Ontario government abruptly ended its wastewater surveillance program earlier than planned this summer, despite having funding in place until the end of September and being warned that the move could leave gaps in crucial information for public health, internal documents indicate.

The government pulled the plug at the end of July on the globally praised program that, at its peak, covered about 75 per cent of the province.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The program, overseen by the Ministry of the Environment, provided an early warning signal to health officials about the spread of COVID-19, influenza, RSV and other infectious diseases, based on wastewater testing.

Documents obtained through access to information by the Ottawa Citizen indicate that the province's hasty decision last spring to end the program came before Ontario's Ministry of Health had even begun negotiations with the federal government about taking over wastewater surveillance.

It also required terminating existing agreements with the academic laboratories that did the surveillance.

In public statements, the province said the federal government was moving to expand its sampling to additional sites in Ontario.

“To avoid duplication, Ontario is working closely with the federal government to support this expansion while winding down the provincial Wastewater Surveillance Initiative.”



STORY CONTINUES BELOW

An internal memo warned that was a risk.

“Negotiations with the Ministry of Health and the federal government have not yet begun. The ministry does not know when the federal government would be ready to take over surveillance at their proposed sampling locations and there may be an interruption in availability of results from when Ontario winds down to when the federal government is able to resume.”

The federal government indicated in early 2024 that it wanted to expand its wastewater surveillance network within Ontario to include sites in Hamilton, London, Windsor and Ottawa, in addition to existing sites in the GTA.

Since the province shut down its program on July 31, there has been no word from the federal government about plans to expand wastewater testing in Ontario, even as the province is experiencing a large summer wave of COVID-19.

The internal memo also noted that wastewater surveillance “offers the ability to test the whole population to identify trends in viral spread, such as COVID-19 or influenza, at a relatively low cost, which provides public health the ability to quickly identify, prevent and respond to health threat surges and waves to protect the health and safety of the population.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Since 2020, the Ontario government, through the Ministry of Environment Conservation and Parks, invested \$79 million to build and operate the wastewater surveillance network. That funding mainly went to 13 academic and research institutions for sampling, analyzing and reporting to public health units.

That money included \$13.1 million for its final six months until Sept. 30, some of which was not spent after the province decided to end the program early.

Researchers working on the program were not notified until the end of May, just two months before the shutdown.

At the time, Rob Delatolla, the uOttawa engineering professor who led the movement to begin wastewater testing at the beginning of the pandemic, said he had been shocked to learn funding would end on July 31.

His lab is one of a small handful of wastewater surveillance programs in the province that are continuing beyond that date, using research funding.

But supplemental funding for the program based at uOttawa will only last until the end of September.

An internal memo from the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks said the province has partnered with 12 academic research institutions as well as the National Microbiology Lab in Winnipeg, in co-operation with all 34 local public health units and 53 municipalities, “to create an integrated, province-wide sampling and analysis network that enhances the ability of public health agencies to provide timely responses to COVID-19, influenza and RSV in many of our communities.”

The memo also noted that terminating or amending the existing agreements with academic institutions would be time-consuming and potentially costly.

“This takes a lot of time and resources for both (ministry) and the academic laboratories. With the timing so close to the end of the project activities, it is hard to justify changing the agreements.

“Ending agreements early would make stakeholders unhappy and could potentially cause loss of confidence in the government as agreements are not honoured and so little notice of the changes were provided.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Research done by Delatolla and others showed that using wastewater surveillance to better pinpoint the start of seasonal RSV prevented 295 children from being hospitalized and 950 hospital visits, saving the province \$3.5 million.

The cost per child for the surveillance program was 50 cents per season, according to Delatolla.

The provincial government and individual MPPs received thousands of letters from residents who were concerned about the decision to pull the plug on wastewater surveillance.

One of those letters warned that ending funding for Ontario’s network “will have dangerous consequences. We will no longer have a reliable early warning system to inform everyone about the spread of emerging SARS-CoV-2 subvariants and new threats such as avian flu. Without advance warning, hospitals may be completely overwhelmed when new hyper-infectious subvariants emerge and spread exponentially.”

Wastewater surveillance is being expanded in some parts of the world amid new threats from diseases such as avian influenza and mpox.

uOttawa's Delatolla said at the time no explanation was offered to researchers about why the program was ending prematurely.

In subsequent public statements, the province repeated that protecting the health and well-being of Ontarians was its top priority.

But it didn't answer directly why it was ending the project early and terminating existing agreements before talks had even begun with the federal government.

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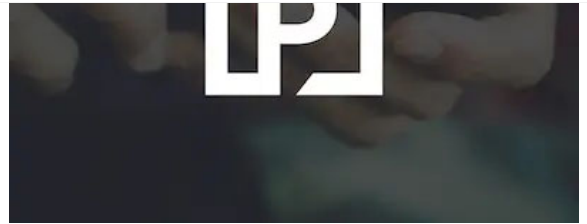
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