

Group lauds feds for moving ahead on EA for 413

By Mark PavilonsEditor

Environmental Defence has praised the federal government for stepping in to perform a thorough environmental assessment (EA) of the proposed Highway 413. This action is necessary, they say, due to the Ontario government's dangerous plan to undermine the environmental reviews of this highway and race to its construction. If built, Highway 413 will destroy critical farmland, portions of the Greenbelt, wetlands, forests, and endangered species. It would add millions of tonnes of carbon pollution and endanger the health of nearby communities with increased air pollution. The decision to build this highway cannot proceed without thoroughly considering and addressing these impacts, which a federal environmental assessment can provide. Environmental Defence, represented by Ecojustice, requested a federal EA of Highway 413 on Feb. 3, 2021 that was supported by Ontario Nature, Transport Action Ontario, Sierra Club Peel, Halton Environmental Network, Oakville Green, Sustainable Vaughan, and Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust. The request garnered the support of every single municipality and regional government along the highway's proposed route, along with 53 scientists and over 22,000 citizens. "Minister Wilkinson has listened to the concerns of local citizens along the proposed path of Highway 413, and the unanimous voice of local governments who supported this request for a federal environmental assessment," said Sarah Buchanan, Ontario Climate Program Manager at Environmental Defence. "Impacted people and governments don't want to see the province spend billions to destroy critical farmland, portions of the Greenbelt, wetlands, forests, and endangered species, when experts have told us it will only save an average of 30-60 seconds per trip." "The federal environmental assessment will ensure a robust process for identifying and mitigating, where possible, any environmental impacts from Highway 413, and will ensure that climate change is adequately considered. We are confident that this added scrutiny will ultimately reveal that this highway is not in the public interest," said Laura Bowman, lawyer, Ecojustice. While it is disappointing that another 400-series highway, the Bradford Bypass, was not designated for a federal environmental assessment, the group welcomes this important decision from the federal government to hit pause on Highway 413 and take a thorough look at its environmental impacts. The province should follow the federal government's lead and reconsider their proposal to build the Bradford Bypass without considering its environmental impacts. The group's original request for a federal environmental assessment is available here: <https://d36rd3gki5z3d3.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-02-03-GTA-West-EA-request.pdf> While this latest news is encouraging, Environmental Defence, just last week, issued a report that found the new highway will increase pollution. The proposed Highway 413 will increase transportation emissions in the province, escalate suburban sprawl alongside the highway, and cause billions of dollars in damages from heightened air pollution in nearby communities. That's the conclusion of Environmental Defence's new report "Paving Paradise: The Impact of Highway 413 on Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Air Pollution and Sprawl." Environmental Defence teamed up with Eunomia Research & Consulting to calculate that the vehicles using Highway 413 will add up to 700,000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions annually, leading to a cumulative total of 17.4 million tonnes of emissions by 2050, assuming today's vehicle mix remains unchanged. This is more pollution than the entire City of Toronto emitted in 2018. "Transportation emissions have been rising in the GTHA for years," said Sarah Buchanan, Ontario Climate Program Manager at Environmental Defence. "The province's plan to build the multi-billion-dollar Highway 413 will make this worse by putting more cars on the road. Ontario's climate change targets to reduce emissions are already a distant hope, but encouraging more driving and suburban sprawl will make them completely unattainable." Scientists stress that to avoid climate catastrophe we must reach net-zero emissions by 2050. But building Highway 413 locks Ontarians into a high-carbon future where more people are encouraged to drive, and more sprawling subdivisions and strip malls replace valuable farmland and green spaces. called a sprawl accelerator.