

Efforts to prevent future Marsh flooding

By Mark Pavilons

Parts of the Holland Marsh were flooded May 25 with a rush of water from a breach in the dyke that protects it. Subsequently another breach on the morning of June 16 further overwhelmed the area.

Simcoe-York MPP Julia Munro wrote to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Minister of Agricultural and Food, requesting the area be declared a disaster area and emergency action be taken.

"We have to fix this so that it doesn't happen again," said Munro as she reflected on the impact this disaster is having on the farmers within the Holland Marsh.

According to Munro, "the effect on the local economy will be crippling. With this season's crops ruined, it is imperative that assistance is provided to ensure a stable future for farmers in the Marsh."

In light of these events Munro is advocating that the Province recognize the immediate need for action and provide all necessary assistance to the areas that have been devastated by the disaster.

King Councillor Avia Eek, a Holland Marsh farmer, said she was "shocked" when she heard about the first dyke failure in May, and she drove out to see the affected area.

It seems there were high water levels in the West Holland River, and as a result, the existing dykes were saturated. Add strong north winds to the mix which served to push the water south, thereby raising the water levels, and you have a dyke failure. There was anywhere from 4 feet to 10 feet of water measured on some 170 acres of farmland used for intensive agriculture "high value vegetable crops.

The failed dyke was repaired, and the area de-watered. The land was wet, but the farmers still had hope that they'd be able to salvage the season by planting late carrots.

That hope was dashed when the dyke failed again June 16.

"The growing season for these farmers is finished," Eek said. The council of Bradford West Gwillimbury, did, however, declare this a disaster area, and is currently working with the Province of Ontario, the Holland Marsh Growers Association, the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, and the Holland Marsh Joint Services Drainage Board.

Part of the reason for the canal re-location project was to prevent flooding, due to extreme weather events, within the polders. The Holland Marsh is provincially designated as a Specialty Crop Area, where high value vegetable crops are produced, and is vital as an economic driver to King Township, Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, York Region, the Province of Ontario, and Canada. This area's economic impact is in excess of \$169 million, Eek pointed out.

Is there any danger of this happening closer to home?

"Having a strong dyke system that can withstand current and future weather events is crucial to maintaining our food security in this area."

For more information about the canal re-location project go to hollandmarsh.org.