The Ontario Oil, Gas and Salt Resources Library: A Model for Groundwater Data Sharing in Ontario?

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In a 2009 report on sustainable management of groundwater in Canada, an expert panel of groundwater specialists identified “collection, maintenance, and management of existing and newly collected groundwater-related data, coupled with ready access to these data, be viewed as a priority for action across the country” (Council of Canadian Academies, 2009). Since that time there has been some progress, in particular with respect to access to water well records, but broader and more holistic collection and sharing of groundwater data still is not occurring.

Government agencies are the public source of groundwater data in Canada. Traditionally, provincial governments have been the lead agencies in collecting regional-scale data in the form of water well records and dedicated water level monitoring wells, and providing public access to this data. Municipalities and conservation authorities collect data at local scales and the federal government has generally played a national coordinating role. Access to data, where it is provided, has generally been free. The real cost of collecting, maintaining and improving these datasets is not readily discernible.

In a continuing environment of spending constraints at all levels of government, and in particular at provincial governments, these databases, and supporting source data, are vulnerable. In 1997 the Ontario government withdrew its funding of the Petroleum Resources Laboratory which had provided free public access to well records and drilling samples from petroleum wells since 1971, and declared the staff redundant. There was a very real risk that these records and samples would be destroyed. Fortunately the Ontario petroleum industry recognized the value of maintaining and continuing the data operations of the Laboratory and in its place has emerged the Oil, Gas and Salt Resources Library.

The Library is a unique and innovative approach to data sharing, driven by necessity. The Library business model is based on profit-driven data vendors in western Canada and the United States who package and market access to public petroleum well data, as well as a wide variety of other data and data products. The small size of the industry in Ontario does not support a 100% fees-based model so the Library is a hybrid. Its possible use as an alternative model for funding and managing groundwater data in Ontario is explored in this report.