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Web site takes new approach to public right to know

Pollution Probe has opened a unique web site that gives people in a community a new way to find answers to questions about their environment.

[Enviroplace](#), a web-based pilot project featuring the Sarnia-Lambton community, went on line Feb. 22. It provides better access to information already collected.

“The web site is the first of its kind where people can find information about their community on their terms,” says Rick Findlay, director of Pollution Probe’s water program.

Enviroplace is unique because it allows the user to select and pull down information that is of interest to them instead of a top-down approach where the information given out is presented in a format that suits the government or agency that posts it, he says

It is a way of presenting updated information on environmental monitoring currently being done by the federal, provincial and municipal governments as well as by industry and presenting it in a format relevant to the user.

Access to information is often difficult because the information is raw data or resides in many different places and has not been not integrated, Findlay explains. He says he first imagined such a site in 1999 as a better approach to the public’s right to know.

The data for the pilot project is specific to the Sarnia-Lambton area, deliberately chosen partly because it is known as Canada’s “Chemical Valley,” Findlay says. “It is also a data-rich area.”

Local industry has been very co-operative in supplying data for the site, he says. 'The chemical industry is very sensitive to environmental issues and they do want to be trusted.'

The site is very much a collaborative thing, with input from many organizations in Sarnia-Lambton and data supplied by all three levels of government, the local conservation authority, environmental agencies and industry, he says. .

Anyone can go to the site to find out about everything from local water and air quality to crop production, land use and population density. The site uses Pollution Probe's primer series for information about a host of environmental concerns including climate change and health, smog, air quality and drinking water.

The site also features the Envirobrain, a sophisticated technological tool that enables people to create and download charts, maps and graphs. There are many links on the site to additional online sources of information including the local weather forecast.

Findlay's goal is public policy that government use the technology necessary to create data that can be used by the GIS map-layering technology employed for Envirobrain.

He would like to see the Sarnia-Lambton initiative eventually become the template for similar sites in communities across Canada. "Data and information are a foundation of making informed decision to protect the environment and human health," he says.