

For Immediate Release

DNA Cluster Project Under Attack

Rabies boondoggle threatens to create white elephant at Trent University

Peterborough, Ont., February 9, 2005: Wildlife organizations across Ontario have teamed up with Trent University students and concerned residents to demand an immediate halt to the proposed new DNA research building at Trent University. The Ontario Wildlife Coalition and the Trent Central Student Association (TCSA) say the controversial project is threatening to wipe out responsible wildlife rehabilitation across the province, while saddling the university with an expensive “white elephant” that will siphon scarce financial resources from more pressing academic priorities.

The two organizations are calling on Ontario government’s Auditor General to review the project, as well as the role of its primary partner and tenant, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR).

The TCSA has been waging a very public battle against the university’s DNA “cluster” for several months, criticizing its lack of a business plan and questionable governance practices.

“The process surrounding this project has been secretive and exclusionary from the onset,” says Shantel Ivits, TCSA’s Vice President University Affairs. “Millions of dollars in public funding continue to flow into this project, and we have yet to see a formal business plan. It’s irresponsible that the university would pursue a project that risks becoming a white elephant to our already cash-strapped institution.”

The Ontario Wildlife Coalition’s main concern with the project is its focus on rabies - one of the lowest risks to human health in North America.

The new building, scheduled to begin construction soon, will house Trent University’s Natural Resources DNA Profiling and Forensic Centre, the commercialization offices of the DNA Cluster, and the Rabies Research and Development Unit of the OMNR.

“Fear mongering and misinformation about rabies by the OMNR have proven highly successful in building the largest research program of its kind anywhere in North America. Not only are millions of public dollars being squandered on the DNA buildings at Trent but taxpayers will continue to be on the hook for ongoing operating costs for unwarranted rabies programs,” says Coalition member Donna DuBreuil.

The DNA Cluster project has managed to attract more than \$10.5 million in taxpayer dollars to date, with another \$12.5 million pending. Included in this funding is \$3.6 million from the Canada Foundation for Innovation, as well as \$815,000 from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council to study the genetic makeup of raccoons who may have hitchhiked into Canada aboard trucks crossing the border.

“Raccoon rabies research is big business in Ontario, despite the fact that only one person in Virginia has died of the disease since it was discovered fifty years ago. To put the virtually non-existent rabies risk in perspective, consider that 60 people die from lightning strikes and 40 or more die from hornet and wasp stings annually in the U.S.” says Liz White, Coalition spokesperson. “This research has absolutely no public benefit. Yet it has resulted in the killing of thousands of healthy animals throughout Eastern Ontario as a result of the Ministry’s controversial ‘depopulation’ program, actions by OMNR to outlaw humane wildlife rehabilitation, and wasteful spending of public money that could have gone to real priorities such as health care.”

OMNR’s draconian approach to raccoon rabies is not only costing taxpayers millions of dollars, it is also threatening to shutdown wildlife rehabilitation across the province. New regulations tabled in December by the provincial government will effectively outlaw all humane and responsible caring of orphaned and injured wildlife in the province.

“We believe this project is bad for Trent, bad for Peterborough, bad for wildlife and bad for taxpayers,” says Ivits. “It’s time for accountability and it’s time for answers.”

Trent University has until the end of the year to finish construction on the first phase of the building, or risk losing over \$7 million in federal and provincial funding.

- 30 -

For further information

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About the Ontario Wildlife Coalition:

The Ontario Wildlife Coalition represents over 80 environmental and animal welfare groups across the province. It includes environmental educators and community advisors, research scientists, veterinarians, wildlife rehabilitators, lawyers, journalists and animal protection organizations. Its mandate is to advocate on behalf of wildlife in Ontario and to seek long-term and progressive solutions for human/wildlife conflicts through remedial action, public education and awareness and habitat protection.

About the Trent Central Student Association:

The Trent Central Student Association, Local 71 of the Canadian Federation of Students, is the student union that represents full-time undergraduates at Trent University. The TCSA is operated by a democratically-elected Board of Directors and seeks to preserve Trent University's unique identity as a small, socially and environmentally-conscious institution dedicated to the liberal arts and sciences within a collegial setting.