



CONSERVATION ONTARIO 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

#ConservationMatters





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ADAPTING TO A YEAR OF CHALLENGES

Conservation Ontario and the 36 conservation authorities (CAs), were particularly challenged by two simultaneous events – the onset of a pandemic and significant legislative changes to the Conservation Authorities Act (CAA) and the Planning Act.

The impact of COVID-19 on the conservation authorities was significant throughout 2020. Initially it triggered losses in revenue, the need to transition staff to work remotely and even laying off some staff. Hardest hit business areas among conservation authorities were education, stewardship and conservation area programs. As time passed and Ontario adjusted to pandemic conditions, conservation authorities and Conservation Ontario pivoted and moved forward with new ways of doing business. Working together, we immediately developed new operating protocols required to ensure social distancing for staff to work and Boards of Directors to meet. More detail is provided on this further in this report.

Impacts were also felt in conservation areas. As a result of COVID-19, many Ontarians had to work from home or stay home as much as possible. To manage the mental and physical impacts this created, people turned to the outdoors, flooding conservation areas. For most of last year, almost all of the conservation areas experienced significantly larger visitor numbers than ever before.

At the same time, the Province led the development of some big changes to the way conservation authorities do business. In the fall of 2020, the Province introduced Schedule 6 as part of its fall budget and it had significant consequences for conservation authorities' work around planning and development permits. An unprecedented groundswell of support for conservation authorities to delay the changes coalesced across a number of sectors: environmental, municipal and, most widely, across the general public. Conservation authorities became the number two media story next to the pandemic. However, Bill 229, the *Protect, Support and Recover from COVID-19 Act (Budget Measures Act)* received Royal Assent in early December. This was quickly followed by an announcement just before the New Year that the Province was establishing a working group comprised of representatives from conservation authorities, municipalities, agriculture and the development sector. Their goal is to assist the Province by providing input on the development of the proposed regulations which operationalize the amendments brought forward through the *Conservation Authorities Act*.

The support shown for the work of conservation authorities was confirmation that CAs play an important and valued role in protecting, conserving and restoring Ontario's natural resources.

SIGNIFICANT LEGISLATIVE CHANGES TO THE WORK OF CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES IN 2020

BILL 229 – SCHEDULE 6: CHANGES TO THE CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES ACT

On November 5th, the Province introduced Bill 229, *Protect, Support and Recover from COVID-19 Act (Budget Measures)*, 2020 (budget bill) in the legislature including Schedule 6 amending the *Conservation Authorities Act* (CAA), and the *Planning Act*. This Bill included proposed significant changes to the CAA. Conservation Ontario (CO) formally

outlined the concerns of CAs in a presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs on November 30th. A significant amount of media and public attention was focused on the changes being proposed. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario and a number of local municipalities joined Conservation Ontario and others in asking for Schedule 6 to be withdrawn from the Bill so that it could be discussed further.

Conservation Ontario and the conservation authorities were particularly concerned with amendments proposed to the *Planning Act*, permits for regulation, conservation authority governance and additional provincial powers around Ministerial Zoning Orders. It was felt that the changes would actually create more red tape and added delays with less transparency for the general public. CO and the CAs were also worried that the changes would affect the ability of conservation authorities to deliver effective watershed management programs and services.

PROVINCIAL MULTI-STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS (JANUARY – MARCH 2020)

Early in the year, the Province hosted four stakeholder engagement consultations on the *Conservation Authorities Act* (January 31st – Barrie; February 7th – Colborne; February 14th – London; and March 5th – North Bay).

The consultations included a series of discussion questions and brief presentations by Conservation Ontario (CO), the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), Ontario Homebuilders Association, Ducks Unlimited, Federation of Ontario Cottagers, Ontario Landowners Association and an independent consulting company.

In preparation for the consultations, CO worked with the conservation authorities (CAs) and provided webinars, backgrounders and communication materials to support the conservation authorities' participation in the consultations. Conservation Ontario prepared a template letter and/or resolution for conservation authorities' member municipalities. The Association of Municipalities (AMO) of Ontario also wrote a letter to the Province and included a number of municipal resolutions. In their letter, AMO indicated they were not looking for wholesale change, but had some suggestions for improvements.



CLIENT SERVICE AND STREAMLINING INITIATIVE

To support the Provincial government's objective of increasing housing supply without jeopardizing public health and safety or the environment, Conservation Ontario undertook actions in 2020 on the three solutions identified as part of the CO Client Service and Streamlining Initiative.

The three solutions include: Improving Client Service and Accountability; Increasing Speed of Approvals; and Reducing Red Tape and Regulatory Burden.

2020 activities include a second interim report on High Growth CA permitting timelines and continuing work related to the development of an updated CO/Hydro One Memorandum of Understanding.

As the Initiative has been positively received by conservation authorities, industry stakeholders and the Province, CO has prepared an interim 2021 workplan to guide activities over the next year, recognizing that priorities may change based on outcomes of the ongoing Conservation Authorities Act review and subsequent regulations.

Public Engagement

Prior to the passage of Bill 229, Conservation Ontario launched a public outreach strategy to express our concerns with the proposed amendments garnering coverage from more than 160 different media articles. Conservation Ontario also posted a series of infographics on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Engagement across all social media platforms was up significantly. As well, a blog was written calling for the removal of Schedule 6 and for the Province to sit down with municipalities and conservation authorities to find more workable solutions. There was significant support from the general public, municipalities, environmental nonprofit organizations and others for this position.

Conservation Ontario's website featured municipal, media and stakeholder engagement including resolutions, letters of support, media articles and conservation authority media releases. The conservation authorities were instrumental in providing us with the materials we needed to showcase and engage local media. Conservation Ontario's presentation and submission to the committee were also included on CO's website.

Bill Passed December 8, 2020

The Bill received Royal Assent on December 8th 2020. Shortly afterwards, the Province announced the establishment of a multi-stakeholder working group to assist in guiding the development of the implementing regulations. Conservation Ontario and a number of conservation authorities were named to the committee along with representatives from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, agriculture and the development sector.

Conservation Ontario will continue to engage with the Province on regulatory and policy priorities resulting from the outcomes of Bill 229.



MEMBER SERVICES

SUPPORTING CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES WITH PANDEMIC CONDITIONS GUIDANCE, ENGAGEMENT TOOLS, TRAINING

Conservation Ontario Guidance for Conservation Authorities During Pandemic Conditions

Like many others, the COVID-19 pandemic had repercussions on conservation authorities' business in 2020. Conservation authorities experienced initial losses in traditional revenue sources, particularly around education programs, lands and conservation areas, watershed stewardship programs, corporate services and charitable foundations. This, in addition to emergency measures announced by the Province, led to staff layoffs as well. Most conservation authority staff worked remotely for much of the year. Some staff were able to work in the field with restrictions to ensure social distancing. Pandemic conditions required conservation authorities to assess their current program operations in order to adapt to social distancing requirements. Additionally, CA Boards needed to be able to meet virtually and this was enabled by a timely MECP Minister's Direction.

Conservation Ontario developed a number of new tools including provincial direction, best management practices, protocols, guidelines and standard operating practices to

support conservation authorities during pandemic conditions. These included the final guidance materials which were posted:

- Minister's Direction CA Administrative By-law amendments (amended April 6, 2020)
- Minister's Direction Procedural BMPs #1 closed meetings & delegations
- Minister's Direction Procedural BMPs #2 Remote SPC Meetings
- Amendments to Procedures Regarding Permit Hearings
- Enforcement of Public Safety and Security Orders

An online platform was used to enable CO and CA staff to share information about specific program areas. Final guidance documents were posted.

Conservation Ontario also provided early communication guidance to address conservation areas issues associated with COVID-19, including social distancing and overcrowding, closing and opening of conservation areas and discontinued programs.

As well, bi-monthly teleconferences and virtual meetings were held throughout much of the year with the General Managers. CO weekly e-mails and council e-bulletins continued to ensure our members were kept up to date.

SUPPORT FOR CAs DURING THE CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES ACT REVIEW AND BILL 229

To support conservation authorities with local advocacy and communications efforts, Conservation Ontario prepared a number of resources to be used by CAs throughout 2020.

These resources included:

- background information and messaging for participation in provincial CAA consultations early in the year
- advocacy strategies, social media communication plans and messaging
- background material including a detailed reference document for CAOs/GMs which outlined a generalized description of the legislative changes as well as proposed general positioning and a summary of the legislative amendments and implications for conservation authorities to be used with CA boards
- two proposed municipal resolution templates for CAs to use to engage the support of their partner municipalities
- social media and communication tools for CA public engagement and meetings with political and municipal partners

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED TO CONSERVATION AUTHORITY STAFF

Source Water Protection

In January and February of 2020, Conservation Ontario provided the Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment Tool training over seven sessions to approximately 150 participants. The tool is one of the first of its kind in the province, developed through a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach and funded by the Ministry of Environment, Parks and Conservation in 2019. It provides a consistent, semi-quantitative approach that counts for both climate change vulnerability and risks associated with drinking water threats.

Other Programs

- Level 1 Provincial Offences Officer Training (26 staff from 16 CAs)
- Search Warrant – Refresher and Implementation Training (48 CA staff / 23 CAs)
- Post-Latornell Regulatory Compliance Training (61 CA staff)
- Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program Engagement Planning (55 CA staff)

Webinars

- Key Changes to the *Conservation Authorities Act* (157 CA staff)
- Bill 229, Schedule 6 Conservation Authorities Act Governance and Risk Management (48 CA staff)
- Excess Soil Regulation (63 CA staff from 32 CAs)
- DataStream: An Open Access Hub for Sharing Water Data (35 CA staff, 21 CAs)
- Provincial Flood Forecast and Warning Webinar Series (5 sessions, 100+ CA staff, 36 CAs)
- Breeding Bird Atlas 3rd Edition collaborative opportunities for CAs (40 CA staff, 20 CAs)
- Carbon Offset opportunities on CA forested lands (30 CA staff, 15 CAs)

TRACKING AND PROVIDING INPUT TO POLICIES THAT IMPACT CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES

PROVIDING ADVICE TO CONSERVE NATURAL RESOURCES AND PROTECT PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

Conservation Ontario (CO) coordinates conservation authority (CA) review of Provincial and Federal policy proposals and consultations that affect, or benefit from, the conservation authority business of conserving natural resources and protecting public health and safety.

All 36 CAs participated in the *Conservation Authorities Act* consultations and amendments for which three submissions were made.

CONSERVATION ONTARIO POLICY SUBMISSIONS

Additionally, 22 of 36 CAs actively participated in development of 16 CO submissions that can be found on CO's website conservationontario.ca/resources. In 2020, submissions were made on policy proposals related to: Updating Ontario's Water Quantity Management Framework, Modernization of various Regulations under various Acts (e.g. Lakes & Rivers Improvement Act, Aggregate Resources Act, Environmental Protection Act, Water Resources Act, Environmental Assessment Act, Endangered Species Act and Clean Water Act), Modernization of legislation/Provincial Plans (e.g. Drainage Act, Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe), Federal Economic Stimulus, and the Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee (e.g. partnerships with conservation areas and water and erosion control infrastructure).

Class EA Annual Review

Conservation Ontario also submitted its Class EA Annual Review Report to the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) on the use of the Class Environmental Assessment for Remedial Flood and Erosion Control Projects and continued to work with MECP on streamlining improvements to CO's Class EA.



PROGRAMS

PROVINCIAL FLOODING STRATEGY

As a result of the provincial Flood Advisor's 2019 report on flooding in Ontario, the Province released "*Protecting People and Property: Ontario's Flooding Strategy*" in March 2020. It outlines steps to be taken by Ontario over the next several years and contains actions designed to address and build upon the recommendations in the Flood Advisor's report. Conservation Ontario reviewed the Strategy and mapped out draft CO/CA priorities for liaison with provincial ministries on priority actions and activities.

Ontario's Flooding Strategy presents a significant opportunity to work collaboratively with the responsible provincial ministries on Conservation Ontario priorities including:

- Floodplain mapping
- Updates to technical guidelines
- Section 28 regulations
- Natural hazards program and service regulation
- Funding programs

Later, in 2020, a provincial Flood Mapping Technical Team was established to begin work on the Flood mapping theme under Ontario's Flooding Strategy with CO and CA staff participating on this Team. Conservation authorities are also participating in committees which are focused on the following activities that support implementation of Ontario's flooding strategy:

1. Multi-year approach to updating flood mapping
2. Foundational Geospatial Data
3. Survey and Mapping
4. Flood Hazard Technical Guides



Provincial Flood Forecasting and Warning Committee

As a result of pandemic conditions, the 2020 Flood Forecast and Warning workshop was transformed to a webinar series with five sessions that took place over September to November. The goal of the workshop is to provide links between agencies responsible for flood forecasting and warning, emergency management, flow measurement and data collection, as well as other partners, to address policy and implementation needs and issues, and to facilitate training. TRCA provided logistical and administrative support. The organizing committee was comprised of CA and Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) members of Ontario's Flood Forecast and Warning committee members and Conservation Ontario. Themes covered, technology and lessons learned, communications and policy.

Federal Support for Flood Management

A number of federal initiatives were launched including a new task force on Flood Insurance and Relocation. A federal initiative to develop flood mapping standards was also developed. CO staff provided input with Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority staff and Natural Resources Canada to the development of an on-line flood mapping metadata application using the schema from the 2015 Metadata Inventory of Existing CA Flood Mapping. This application has been developed with the intent of helping provinces and territories provide regular updates on the status of mapping across Canada.

Another federal funding intake under the National Disaster Mitigation Program was announced to support Flood mapping projects in December. Administrative and Technical support is provided to this program from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) and the Province hosted two Webinars for potential applicants in mid-November.

WATER AND EROSION CONTROL INFRASTRUCTURE – KEEPING PEOPLE AND PROPERTY SAFE

Continued Funding Support for Conservation Authorities' Flood Infrastructure

The Province provides a \$5 million/year matched funding program for CAs' Water and Erosion Control Infrastructure (WECl). The Provincial Committee, consisting of MNRF, CO and CA staff, reviewed 106 funding applications from 30 CAs for 2020/21 with total project costs around \$19 million. The Province approved 68 infrastructure safety and repair projects and studies with a value of \$10 million for 21 conservation authorities.

WECl Database

The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) continued to provide financial support in 2020 for Conservation Ontario to maintain the Water and Erosion Control Infrastructure (WECl) database.

Since 2003, MNRF has provided capital transfer payments to CAs to undertake essential repairs and studies on existing CA owned and/or operated water and erosion control infrastructure. MNRF's financial support allows CO to continue to manage and maintain the project and infrastructure database that support the WECl program. Outputs from the database are used throughout the year by CA staff and the WECl steering committee to help guide decisions regarding the priority allocation of available provincial funding. In addition, the database informs the CA Insurance Committee regarding the current status of CA water and erosion control infrastructure and the level of risk associated with it.

Conservation Ontario manages the administration of user accounts, passwords and database security as well as additional back-end support as required for more complex issues with project and data entry.

DRINKING WATER SOURCE PROTECTION PROGRAM (DWSP)

Conservation Ontario (CO) hosted three Conservation Authority (CA) Project Manager meetings and participated in three Source Protection Chair meetings in 2020. A new coordinator, Deborah Balika, was hired by Conservation Ontario in June.

Conservation Ontario also hosted a Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) meeting on September 22, 2020. A detailed list of proposed eligible activities, with rationale, was presented to help inform the 2021/22 program application guide. This list was compiled with input from the Project Managers and included special consideration to incorporate the proposed amendments to the Technical Rules which, if approved, will come into effect in the 2021/22 fiscal planning year.

Conservation Ontario maintained a very active ongoing social media campaign on Facebook and Twitter, to support the profiling of the DWSP program and the role of CAs. Through the 'Winter Wednesdays' social media campaign, which were co-produced with a small number of CAs, a total of 15 weekly posts were provided to CA staff in advance in order to support the campaign. CO has continued to focus on the advances and success that the Source Water Protection program has achieved.



INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Gordon Foundation and DataStream

In the fall of 2020, Conservation Ontario participated in a pilot project with the Gordon Foundation. The project focused on CA water quality monitoring data and sought CAs to volunteer to showcase their data through the Foundation's DataStream application. DataStream is an open access platform for sharing water data and is carried out in collaboration with regional water monitoring networks.

Conservation Ontario co-hosted a webinar with DataStream - *Sharing Water Quality Information in the Great Lakes Region* to share details of the pilot project, the collaboration with the Gordon Foundation and the purpose and mechanics of the DataStream application. A total of 21 CAs attended this webinar with 35 attendees. A recording of the webinar was made available to those who were unable to attend.



Open Data Project

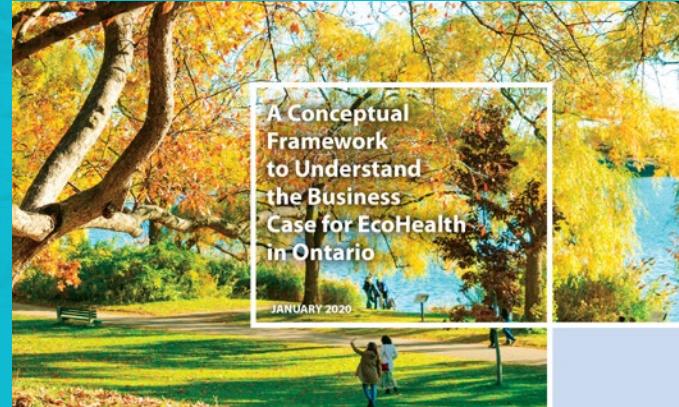
Year 4 of the CO Open Data project wrapped up in 2020. This project helps to make conservation authority data discoverable and accessible to the public. 2020 accomplishments included:

- Improvements to the common CA Metadata Application;
- Application and analytics dashboard development;
- Inclusion of additional CA datasets;
- Promotion of CA Open Data through networking and social media; and
- The launch of the Conservation Ontario Open Data Hub

conservationontario.ca/opendata



INFORMATION MANAGEMENT CON'T



Geography Awareness Week/GIS Day Twitter Campaign

Conservation Ontario engaged in Geography Awareness Week (November 16-20) and GIS Day (November 18) in 2020 with a strategically planned Twitter campaign. Conservation authorities shared content for "GeoWeek".

This year's campaign was successful in reaching over 10,000 people. The highest engagement was generated by a tweet featuring an interactive watershed map developed by Mississippi Valley CA staff that allows the public to search for a property and check current and historical water levels in the area. The GIS Day tweet featuring Conservation Ontario's own Open Data Hub gathered the most views.

mvc.on.ca/water-levels

Building the Business Case for Ecohealth Practices

Conservation Ontario is a member of EcoHealth Ontario which is a collaborative of professionals in the fields of watershed management, public health, medicine, parks, education, planning and the environment.

In 2020, EcoHealth Ontario collaborated with the Greenbelt Foundation and Green Analytics to produce a new report: *A Conceptual Framework to Understand the Business Case for Ecohealth*. The report is targeted to practitioners (including conservation authorities), researchers and decision-makers to help them build the business case for more greenspace investments. Three case studies were undertaken using the conceptual framework to show that ecohealth practices such as parks and outdoor activities can reduce public health costs and provide an economic return on investment. Two conservation authorities participated in the case studies: Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and Credit Valley Conservation.

Conservation Ontario led the communications for this project.

HEALTHY HIKES CAMPAIGN

NEED TO CONNECT WITH NATURE



The need to connect with nature for physical and mental health benefits increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and drove many people to visit conservation areas across the province.

The upswing in visitors, overcrowding issues and behavioural impacts resulted in pivoting the Healthy Hikes campaign to focus on the following themes: Mental Health & Nature – Dealing With Isolation, Nature and Inclusion, Stay on Trails, Conservation Areas Etiquette, Nature and Outdoor Education and Fall Colours. The Nature and Inclusion theme, which focused on Black,

Indigenous and People of Colour and their relationship with nature, was influenced by the reckoning that was happening in the United States and its impact around the world.

With more people at home and online, Conservation Ontario's social media platforms gained a healthy increase in followers and we also introduced the new pandemic-friendly hashtag #StepIntoNatureAtHome – to encourage Ontarians to enjoy nature in their surroundings and to visit local Conservation Areas.

GETTING SOCIAL

Conservation Ontario's 2020 Social Media Round-up



Ontario's Conservation Areas



Conservation Ontario



30.6K



18K



LATORNELL

CONSERVATION SYMPOSIUM



LATORNELL CONSERVATION SYMPOSIUM

The 2020 Latornell Conservation Symposium proceeded differently in 2020 due to the onset of pandemic conditions. Instead of an onsite event, the Steering Committee launched a very successful, smaller five part webinar series called the Latornell Leadership Project. It started in October 2020 and ran until February 2021.

A total of 1,564 people registered for the webinars with 69 percent actually participating. Almost another 1,000 people watched the recorded webinars on YouTube. Conservation Authorities comprised approximately 50% of the participants for each webinar. They are available on the Latornell website: www.latornell.ca

The series included the following webinars:

- **Groundwork: The Foundation and Evolution of the Conservation Authorities in Ontario**
(October 6, 2020)
- **Connecting Planning and Ecology: A Workshop**
(November 19, 2020)
- **Communicating Through a Pandemic**
(December 8, 2020)

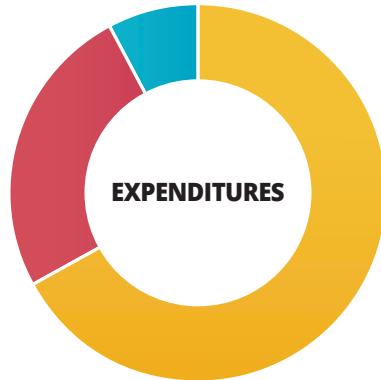
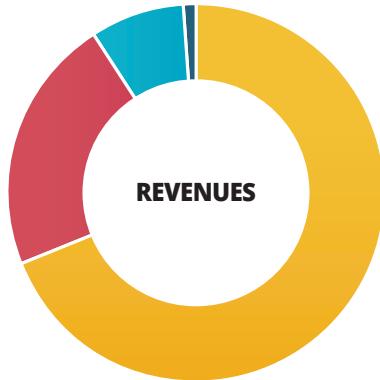
2021 Webinars:

- **Taking Action: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Conservation**
(January 19, 2021)
- **What Makes a Good Leader?**
(February 25, 2021)



2020 FINANCIALS

CONSERVATION ONTARIO



■	69% Membership Fees	\$1,348,001
■	22% Special Projects	\$436,553
■	8% MECP Drinking Water Source Protection	\$161,785
■	1% Other	\$13,260
TOTAL		\$1,959,599

■	67% Operations	\$1,359,252
■	25% Special Projects	\$513,918
■	8% MECP Drinking Water Source Protection	\$153,010
TOTAL		\$2,026,180



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