

ABCA Program Report

To: Board of Directors – Business out of the Minutes
Date: November 20, 2025
From: Davin Heinbuck, General Manager/Secretary-Treasurer
Subject: Draft Resolution: A Response to Proposed Boundaries for the Regional Consolidation of Ontario’s Conservation Authorities

Recommendation:

WHEREAS the Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) Board of Directors acknowledges and supports the Province’s goals of improved efficiency of watershed management, through the implementation of a digital applications and permitting system, consistent policies, flood standards, fees, and technology; and

WHEREAS consistent policies, and resources across the existing conservation authorities boundaries could be achieved through direction and tools such as technical guidelines provided by the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks; or Conservation Ontario; and

WHEREAS conservation authorities are locally based, grassroots organizations formed by municipal governments in response to the challenges posed by a changing landscape; especially, the increased exposure to flooding and erosion hazards and the resulting risks to lives and property. In the case of ABCA, this vision has proved a successful model for 80 years; and

WHEREAS the ABCA, with the guidance and support of our 12 member municipalities, demonstrates fiscal prudence in conservation delivery, ensuring stable growth through stable funding. ABCA has successfully leveraged funding to support programs and services that are locally important and are driven by community engagement through ABCA’s Conservation Strategy and the Watershed Based Resource Management Strategy; and

WHEREAS conservation authorities across the Province operate efficiently by working in close partnership with approximately eight member municipalities for every one conservation authority. This structure enables resources to be directed toward on-the-ground initiatives that advance our mandate while addressing local community needs, achieving an effective balance in scale, management and service delivery; and

WHEREAS plans to regionalize conservation authorities through consolidation would dilute local accountability and municipal partnership and is contrary to the basic principle that decisions are best made closest to the communities they affect. Effective representation by municipal partners remains core to the success of conservation authorities. The ABCA, while not unique among conservation authorities in this respect, is effective in working with our community to support sustainable development, and keeping communities safe; and

WHEREAS being front-line means being responsive and accountable to the community by delivering the services that are essential and valued to the best interest of the community. The front line of provincial priorities on housing, the economy, infrastructure, and climate resilience are in the decisions between municipalities working together to address issues around floodplain (and hazard) protection and resilient upland and landscape management. Further, our staff and Board are responsive and accountable to the needs of the watershed community, while meeting or exceeding provincial service standards. Our staff and Board are reachable through publicly available contact information. Local governance and direction combined with local service provision allows ABCA to continue to be responsive to our community; and

WHEREAS consolidation will result in substantial transition costs, not the least of which is time. In all facets, that would divert resources from front-line service delivery and delay desired outcomes. Further, the loss of local watershed knowledge and community relationships will add greater uncertainty, loss of trust, and delay for our watershed residents. This includes the agricultural community, businesses, builders, developers, and our municipal partners that seek timely and effective local advice, which is provided through local pre-consultation; and

WHEREAS a proposed regional watershed would create a geographically vast and administratively complex organization when joining northern municipalities with those that are rural, such as ABCA, where agriculture is the main economic driver. The differences are distinguishable between the Lake Superior and Georgian Bay watersheds to those in Southwestern Ontario on the shores of Lake Huron. The ABCA serves Southwestern Ontario agricultural communities facing vastly different geographies, climate, and infrastructure realities which would be ill-served by a broad regional administrative structure. This would be considerably worse if local offices do not remain available and accountable to its membership, partners and the communities they serve.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

THAT the Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority Board of Directors does not support the proposed “Huron-Superior Regional Conservation Authority” boundary configuration as outlined in Environmental Registry Notice 025-1257; and

THAT meaningful modernization can occur within the current watershed-based governance framework; and

THAT the ABCA Board endorses further provincial evaluation of a more focused specific model as a geographically coherent, cost-effective and locally accountable alternative that advances the government’s priorities of efficiency, red-tape reduction and timely home construction; and

THAT the Board asks that the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks engage directly with affected municipalities and conservation authorities across Southwestern Ontario through a working group before finalizing any consolidation boundaries or legislative amendments; and

THAT a forthcoming ERO response at the approval of the ABCA Board be forwarded to the Environmental Registry of Ontario consultations; and

THAT a letter from the Chair containing this resolution, and ERO response, be forwarded to:

- the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks and his Opposition critics; and
- the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (CA Office); and
- Ontario’s Chief Conservation Executive, Hassaan Basit; and
- local Members of Provincial Parliament; Matthew Rae (Perth-Wellington), Hon. Lisa Thompson (Huron-Bruce, Minister of Rural Affairs), and Steve Pinsonneault (Lambton-Kent-Middlesex); and
- local MPs; and
- All local watershed municipalities, all municipalities in Ontario, and Counties within ABCA ‘s watershed; and
- the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association; and
- Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation; and
- Conservation Ontario and all Conservation Authorities in Ontario.

Background:

As shared with the ABCA Board at their special meeting held November 6, 2025, the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks has proposed to reduce Ontario's 36 conservation authorities to 7 regional authorities as part of a broader restructuring that would create a new Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency (OPCA) to provide centralized oversight and direction under the Conservation Authorities Act.

Under this proposal, the ABCA would be merged into a new proposed "Huron-Superior Regional Conservation Authority" together with the Maitland Valley CA, Saugeen Valley CA, Grey Sauble CA, Nottawasaga Valley CA, Lake Simcoe Region CA and the Lakehead Region CA (Thunder Bay), which will include approximately 78 municipalities across the range.

On Friday, November 7th, the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks posted Environmental Registry Notice No. 025-1257 ("Proposed Boundaries for the Regional Consolidation of Ontario's Conservation Authorities"), The ERO posting remains open for public comment for a total of 45 days until December 22, 2025 at 11:59 p.m.

Concurrently, Bill 68 was introduced on Thursday, November 6th, indicating that through changes to the Conservation Authorities Act, the OPCA will be established. The OPCA has control of the governance framework of the new regional conservation authorities, has authority over regional conservation authorities, and can charge fees to regional conservation authorities for cost recovery. The OPCA will assess, report and provide direction of regional authorities as it relates to finances, strategic plans, standards, central permitting, and general progress. The proposed plan will see the OPCA have a Board of 5-12 members, appointed by the government, but will not include members of parliament. The board will appoint a CEO, who will establish staffing of the agency. The current status of Bill 68 is that it is in First Reading, and is ordered for Second Reading, and expected to pass shortly.