



Conservation Authorities

Important Partners for a More Resilient Ontario

2022 Pre-Election Discussion Paper

Introduction

One of the lessons we've learned from battling pandemic conditions and managing the impacts of severe natural hazard events across Canada over the past few months is that the key to a more resilient Ontario lies in understanding how nature is so closely connected to our own health and well-being and to our economy. These events confirm for us that we need to do all we can to restore and conserve nature and natural systems.

The goal is to ensure the sustainable use, development, restoration & protection of ecosystem features, functions & linkages. Conservation authorities (CAs) are very effective partners in this work. Conservation authority watershed management programs already contribute significantly to building Ontario's resiliency and can do more.



Value of Conservation Authorities

Conservation authorities are **key delivery agents** for the Province and other levels of government, particularly around natural hazards, source water protection and agriculture. Their programs help improve and protect Ontario watersheds, reduce the risks of flooding and erosion, provide clean drinking water and support the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River systems. They contribute to sustainable agricultural practices and support a wide range of other industry needs.

Conservation authorities also play a key role in managing development. They support a provincial housing strategy by continuing to improve plan review and approval application processes which ensure new development is safe, doesn't create new hazards or deplete natural resources such as drinking water and contributes to environmental sustainability.

As the second largest landowners in Ontario, next to the Province, conservation authorities own and manage a wide variety of province-wide, important natural resources that protect drinking water sources, contribute to climate change adaptation, and engage residents in outdoor activities.

More financial support is needed for conservation authorities to allow them to effectively fulfill their mandates.

Five Recommendations for the Province

1. Provide increased financial and technical support for natural hazard programs in order to continue to effectively protect people and property reducing the risk and costs of flooding and erosion.
2. Provide financial support for the infrastructure and operational needs of conservation areas so that residents can continue to safely visit these natural areas which have become so important for their physical and mental well-being.
3. Provide financial support for the protection, restoration and rehabilitation of watershed natural assets such as forests, grasslands and wetlands. These assets provide important nature-based climate change solutions that absorb carbon, reduce temperatures, reduce peak flows during times of flood and increase water retention on the landscape during times of drought, support a healthy agricultural economy, and protect drinking water sources.
4. Improve the enforcement and offences abilities of conservation authorities by enacting relevant sections of the CA Act and convening a working group including staff from provincial ministries, conservation authorities and municipalities to provide recommendations to the province.
5. Invest in CA watershed studies and research, improve CA technical capacity and expand partnerships in conservation authority monitoring programs.



Building Resilience

Being already familiar with our connection to nature, conservation authorities have long promoted an integrated watershed (IWM) approach to protect and build resiliency within our natural resources and ecosystems. This approach uses a variety of policy and program tools to manage human activities and natural resources, together.

Conservation authority watershed management programs protect important natural assets and ecosystems such as water sources, wetlands, forests and habitats. They contribute to clean and sustainable water resources and help to ensure food security through working with landowners to steward healthy agricultural lands. The outcomes from this work support a broad base of industry such as transportation, tourism, and food production.

Other ways conservation authorities help build Ontario's resilience:

- Protect people and property from flooding and erosion and ensure safe drinking water
- Build and share local science needed for decision-making

- Help to improve the physical and mental well-being of Ontarians by providing access to outdoor activities at conservation areas across the province

Sustainable provincial funding would ensure greater consistency and broader outcomes from conservation authority watershed management programs.

Advantages of conservation authorities:

- Bring community interests together in order to determine regional issues and actions impacting the watershed's resources, and then identify priorities, plans and actions which can be leveraged for broader province-wide outcomes
- Deliver actions and decisions informed by science - watershed scale data collection, monitoring, evaluation and modelling to assess local conditions
- Use a watershed approach to create efficiencies. Watershed strategies, management plans, subwatershed studies and watershed report cards all help to identify priority issues and actions
- Sustain important longstanding partnerships with landowners, government and other agencies which enable conservation authorities to leverage resources for broader outcomes

Closer Look at the Recommendations

1. Help conservation authorities to protect people from flooding and erosion

Recommendation: Increase financial and technical support for natural hazard work and infrastructure to keep up with the growing threats of flooding and erosion.

Flooding events and costs are increasing, not decreasing. Ontario's economy and people are at risk by natural disasters such as flooding and erosion which damage or destroy homes, affect drinking water quality, create business disruptions, decimate agricultural production and result in costly repairs or upgrades.

Conservation Authorities' flood and erosion control infrastructure and programs are a vital part of Ontario's flood protection. People are safer from natural hazards as a result of the approach conservation authorities rely on to reduce the risks of flooding. Monitoring the entire watershed, conservation authorities can anticipate and respond quickly to emergencies as well as help residents to learn how to adapt to changing conditions. CAs protect the lives of almost 95% of Ontario's population living in a conservation authority watershed and prevent well over \$150 million per year in damages.

- Their work includes: monitoring conditions, issuing flood messages, mapping floodplains, educating residents about the threats of flooding and erosion, managing \$3.8 billion in flood and erosion infrastructure and protecting wetlands, forests and natural/vegetated shorelines which help to reduce flooding and erosion.
- Conservation authorities have experienced significant reductions in provincial support for their flood and erosion management. This results in a less resilient watershed which is more vulnerable to climate variability.
- Land use planning is a critical component of an integrated approach to natural hazard management, including, for example, flooding. A cornerstone of the conservation authorities' preventative approach is their plan review and regulatory role and it is this

work that has significant impact on preventing flood impacts on homes and businesses from happening in the first place.

Conservation Authority Client Service Improvements

Conservation authorities facilitate a provincial housing strategy by balancing growth and environmental pressures. They protect new development from flooding and erosion hazards as well as ensure it doesn't create any new hazards or threaten the important sustainability of our natural resources. They do this in part through subwatershed studies/plans and through plan review and permitting roles.

Since April 2019, Conservation Ontario has been working with CAs to make improvements to CA plan review and permitting activities through the [Conservation Ontario Client Service and Streamlining Initiative](#). The Initiative was created to support actions outlined in the provincial *Housing Supply Action Plan*, and identifies a number of actions to improve client service and accountability, increase speed of approvals and reduce red tape to help the Province address the lack of housing supply.

From January 1st – December 31st, 2020, high-growth conservation authorities issued a combined total of 6,652 permits. The CAs were highly successful – issuing 91% of permits within the provincial timelines and 83% within the significantly reduced CO best practices timelines.

In order to support the needs of conservation authorities around natural hazards management, the Province needs to:

- ✓ increase funding for improvements to aging critical flood and erosion control infrastructure
- ✓ update technical guidelines that support effective natural hazards policy
- ✓ ensure adequate sustainable funding for conservation authorities' flood and erosion management programs, including green infrastructure
- ✓ invest in supporting early watershed and subwatershed studies/plans that will support a streamlined and informed development process
- ✓ move as expeditiously as possible to enact Part VII (Enforcement and Offences) of the CA Act

2. Nature Nurtures - Conservation areas need help to continue to contribute to the physical and mental well-being of Ontarians

Recommendation: Provide funding for the infrastructure and operational needs of conservation areas and improve compliance tools so that residents can continue to safely visit these natural areas which have become so important for their physical and mental well-being.

Conservation areas are incredibly important for their natural heritage and climate resiliency values but what we've learned from the pandemic is that conservation areas also need to be recognized as important public health assets and protected for public use.

In order to accommodate more visitors safely, there are common needs in all the conservation areas for infrastructure improvements such as parking upgrades, signage, retrofitting amenities such as trails, bridges and



washrooms, as well as the addition of sanitation stations. Conservation authorities also need more tools to address illegal activity taking place on their lands.

A combination of site design and infrastructure improvements as well as investments in operations, visitor management tools and visitor education information will ensure conservation areas can meet the demand being placed on them by increasing visitor numbers.

- Ontario's conservation authorities collectively own and manage approximately 500 conservation areas in northern and southern Ontario covering a total area of approximately 154,000 hectares. Almost 300 of them are available for use by the general public
- Approximately 8-10 million people visit conservation areas year round for hiking, biking, swimming, fishing, snowshoeing, skiing and many other outdoor recreation activities. A number offer camping and all publicly accessible conservation areas have hiking trails
- Conservation areas act as living classrooms for approximately 3,000 schools and almost 400,000 students each year
- They contribute to local tourism economies via spillover effects of the 8-10 million visitors per year to conservation areas often located near to towns and cities across the province
- Conservation areas' greenspaces located near or adjacent to communities increase the appeal and livability of communities attracting homebuyers, other residents and industry

Specific Health Benefits

Research shows that the health benefits related to greenspaces can reduce costs on our health system. Studies reveal benefits that include: reductions in obesity and type 2 diabetes, improvements in mental health from decreased depression and anxiety, better birth and developmental outcomes and reductions in cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses. The strongest benefits have been found in the reduction of cardiovascular disease and improved mental health and well-being.

Overall, this creates healthcare savings, prevents lost productivity associated with poor mental health and illness, and contributes to reduced mortality.



The Province needs to:

- ✓ Support the infrastructure and operational needs of conservation areas so that residents can continue to safely visit these natural areas

3. Nature-based Solutions for Climate Change Adaptation

Recommendation: Provide financial support for the protection, restoration and rehabilitation of watershed natural assets such as forests, grasslands and wetlands. These assets provide nature-based solutions that absorb carbon, reduce temperatures, reduce peak flows during times of flood and increase water retention on the landscape during times of drought, support a healthy agricultural economy, and protect drinking water sources.



Conservation authority lands provide important benefits that contribute to Ontario’s natural resilience. These habitats support flora and fauna communities, contributing to Ontario’s biodiversity.

As well, the wetlands, forests and other systems in a conservation area help to reduce the risk of flooding and erosion, capture carbon emissions and protect water quality and quantity. These benefits cannot be replaced.

Conservation authority watershed stewardship, stormwater management and green infrastructure programs and services build watershed resilience and reduce the risk of natural hazards.

The natural assets protected by CA programs also help to store carbon, reduce temperatures, improve air and water quality as well as provide important habitat for pollinators, wildlife, birds and fish. They also contribute to healthy soils and sustainable agriculture.

They also contribute to the economic health of Ontario by

- Reducing risk of natural hazard impacts (e.g. flood, erosion) and thus preventing business disruption, and decreasing damage costs from climate change/natural disasters
- protecting the viability of important green infrastructure such as wetlands, trees, healthy water resources, habitats and other biodiversity needed for food security and industry, and
- reducing healthcare system costs by providing opportunities for residents to improve their mental and physical health by being in nature and participating in outdoor recreation, all of which reduces healthcare system costs.

The Province:

- ✓ needs to invest in habitat rehabilitation and restoration which is critical for ensuring we can continue to develop nature-based solutions to address the growing impacts of climate change.

4. Improvements in Compliance Tools

Recommendation: The Province needs to support improvements in the enforcement and offences abilities of conservation authorities by enacting relevant sections of the CA Act and convening a working group to make further recommendations to the province.

Conservation authorities have seen a significant increase in the inappropriate use of their lands since the beginning of the pandemic with a corresponding increase in the number of infractions. Conservation authorities have also seen a significant increase in the number of violations under their Section 28 (development) regulation.

Enforcing regulations is complex and conservation authorities lack the regulatory tools to address infractions outside of the court system. The need to proceed through the court system puts an unnecessary strain on the municipal levy and unfair burden to the local taxpayer.

Conservation authorities need the tools to effectively manage activities on their lands – consistent with those of municipal by-law officers. They also have to be able to address unauthorized activities such as off-road vehicles and liquor consumption on CA owned land which can threaten the safety of visitors. A working group consisting of staff from provincial ministries, conservation authorities and municipalities should be convened to provide recommendations to the province regarding how to improve CA compliance tools.

The Province:

- ✓ needs to enact relevant sections of the CA Act
- ✓ convene a working group on CA compliance tools

5. Conservation authority science is needed to address climate change

Recommendation: Invest in conservation authority watershed studies and research, improve CA technical capacity and expand partnerships in conservation authority monitoring programs

Through the development of their watershed plans and strategies, including drinking water source protection plans and subwatershed plans, conservation authorities monitor and assess local conditions, conduct technical studies, develop strategies and implement programs which help to build our knowledge about the local science in Ontario's watersheds.

Supporting and using conservation authority local science for decision-making will help us to mitigate and adapt to environmental changes caused by increasing climate change impacts such as more intense rainfall and runoff, increasing heatwaves, threats to water quality and quantity as well as fluctuating coastal, river and inland lake shorelines.

Conservation authorities' monitoring programs are some of the longest standing programs in Ontario. CAs use this data to produce watershed report cards to report every five years on surface water quality, groundwater quality and forest conditions. Using Canadian standards, in 2018 they indicated that, on the whole, Ontario's watersheds averaged a 'C' grade. Investments are needed in watershed research, studies and improvements to technical capacity.

Conclusion

Understanding how connected nature is to our health and economy requires us to do whatever we can to adapt to the challenges it presents and to also protect our natural assets and ecosystems which support a healthy population and economy.

Pandemic conditions and the growing impacts of climate change make it imperative that we re-imagine the value of nature and our relationship to it. There has never been a better opportunity to take advantage of our renewed interests in nature and support programs that protect, restore and conserve our important natural resources.

Conservation authorities are cost effective and knowledgeable partners for the Province. For years, they have been protecting Ontario's watersheds and the people who live in them, but we could do a lot more with new or increase provincial support and investments.



Conservation Authorities Are Important Partners for a Resilient Ontario

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