



The Ontario Headwaters Institute

Working to preserve the foundation of Ontario's watersheds

October 19, 2015

Premier Wynne and Ministers Leal, Mauro, McMeekin, and Murray
PDF via e-mail

RE: The Co-ordinated Land Use Planning Review; the Conservation Authorities Act Review; & the Wetland Conservation in Ontario: A Discussion Paper
~ and ~
The opportunity to identify and deliver a more fully integrated system of natural heritage protection, watershed management, and land use planning in Ontario

The Ontario Headwaters Institute and the 25 signatories to this letter encourage the Ontario government to seize the opportunity represented by the simultaneous consideration of the three initiatives cited above - as well as the implementation of the Great Lakes Protection Act (GLPA) and other initiatives - in order to identify and deliver a more fully integrated system of natural heritage protection, watershed management, and land use planning in Ontario.

We suggest that the following actions are needed to provide a more comprehensive vision for Ontario's policy and implementation framework on these issues, and which may otherwise fall between the cracks or not be addressed as much as might be needed, nor integrated, in the current reviews:

1. **Establish Provincial Targets to Protect Natural Heritage** – Ontario's commitments to biodiversity, natural heritage, resilient ecosystems, and ecological integrity would benefit from a provincial document similar to Environment Canada's *How Much Habitat is Enough*, which suggests minimums for forested land, wetlands, planted riparian edge, and other significant features on a watershed basis. Clearly, healthy eco-zones, such as the Great Lakes Basin, are made of the sum of their parts, and overall health is protected when the natural heritage of each portion of our eco-zones is maintained above a precautionary threshold.

We urge the Province to protect Ontario's ecological integrity, economic vitality, and public health by establishing watershed-based targets to protect regional natural heritage and hydrologic systems.

2. **Commit to Integrated Watershed Management (IWM)** - Ontario's current framework for watershed management, *Water Management on a Watershed Basis*, is more than 20 years old and is significantly outdated. For several years, many voices, including those of the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario and Conservation Ontario, have been calling for the province to shift to and provide appropriate funding for Integrated Watershed Management.

We urge the Province to make IWM both a cornerstone of and a key implementation tool for the current initiatives, as well as for the GLPA and other initiatives, and for the Province's commitments on biodiversity and climate change.

3. **Require Watershed Plans under the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS)** – Regardless of the timing of its scheduled review as may be affected by Bill 73, we urge the Province to urgently address the most significant undelivered directive in the PPS by amending a voluntary commitment to watershed management in section 2.2.1 a) to a mandatory one, as follows:

2.2.1 Planning authorities shall protect, improve or restore the quality and quantity of water by:

- a) ~~using the~~ requiring watershed and/or sub-watershed plans as the ecologically meaningful scale for integrated and long-term planning, which can be a foundation for considering cumulative impacts of development.

This is particularly urgent so that Ontario’s current expanding development and the targets of the Growth Plan do not overwhelm the ecological integrity of our natural heritage and aquatic systems.

4. **Harmonize Directives & Definitions and Fill Some Gaps** - A legion of provincial, regional, and municipal initiatives offers competing directives; multiple definitions for features such as a watercourse, a waterway, or a wetland, and varying or absent protocols for tree, small stream, wetland, soil retention, and commercial fill. Key initiatives include the Conservation Authorities Act, the Drainage Act, the Aggregate Resources Act, the PPS, the Green Energy Act, the Clean Water Act, the Lake Simcoe Protection Act, the Province’s support for sustainable agriculture, and the Greenbelt, Moraine, and Growth plan initiatives. There are also conflicting approaches to headwater protection; limited definitions and guidelines around the use of natural channel design, and highly varied regulations for development, interference with wetlands, and alterations to shorelines and watercourses across Ontario.

We urge the Government to harmonize directives and definitions and to fill gaps in provincial, regional, and municipal initiatives and to declare, as soon as possible, the standards in Ontario’s Natural Heritage Reference Manual as mandatory minimums for development, interference with wetlands, and alterations to shorelines and watercourses across Ontario.

5. **Increase Funding for MNRF and MOECC** - A few years ago the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario recommended the tripling of the budgets of what was then MOE and MNR. More recently, a suggestion based on this recommendation was voted number 1 on the Government website for input to the 2015 budget. While the Government is seeking improved performance in these ministries through re-organization and the adoption of new technologies, we perceive that adequate environmental protection is not possible without significant budgetary increases, especially as both ministries will be involved in delivering new initiatives such as the Great Lakes Protection Act and need to improve in the delivery of their mandates, as below.

We urge the Province to allocate appropriate levels of funding to secure a safe environment and resilient ecosystem services for future generations.

6. **Improve / Innovate on the delivery of Ministerial Mandates** – Further to the item above, the delivery of ministry, cross-ministry, and multi-agency collaboration must be enhanced.

Three suggestions for improvement on watershed management that warrant consideration include:

- A suggestion from Conservation Ontario for a “type of provincial watershed governance body (e.g. one ministry, or a lead agency, or a multi-ministry Secretariat or Steering Committee or even a standing agenda item for existing multi-ministry initiatives...)” in order to improve inter-agency cooperation;

- A concept from the OHI, floated in submissions on both the GLPA and the Co-ordinated Land Use Planning Review, to create Regional Water Boards. These Boards could be built on the model of goodwill in Source Protection Committees and could address under-resourced issues such as: local initiatives to conserve water; how to meet watershed targets under item 1 above; and the development of sectoral quotas and their implementation with respect to Level 3 advisories under Ontario's Low Water Response Plan; and,
- The formalization of mandates and the provision of funding for research and multi-agency collaboration. Candidate initiatives include: SMART, Ontario's Stream Monitoring and Research Team; the Provincial Water Quality Monitoring Network; and the informal Headwaters Steering Committee. Each has amazing potential but is essentially volunteer in nature, and would benefit from increased ministerial and financial support.

These and other suggestions to improve the implementation of mandates and encourage innovation might benefit from further discussion with stakeholders.

We urge the province to be brave in ensuring that ministerial mandates get implemented in a **more** collaborative, practical, and effective manner.

7. **Engage Stakeholders in Monitoring and Reporting (M&R)** – M&R has become the contentious domain of agencies. Much of the promised data for both the PPS and the Co-ordinated Land Use Planning Review did not materialize, or was not made available when promised, while other data can be outdated (forest and wetland cover); hard to find (stage 3 science criteria for low water); or massaged (watershed report cards). In addition, stakeholders have not been engaged in crafting the template for watershed report cards from Conservation Ontario; data submitted under permits is not incorporated into agency reports; and reporting on the Provincial Water Quality Objectives is not tied to any form of action, even if a water body exceeds the objectives for one or more criteria year after year.

We urge the Province to engage stakeholders to evaluate current monitoring regimes, identify areas of monitoring and reporting that need improvement, and ensure the public availability of current and meaningful natural heritage and watershed reports.

In conclusion, while the Province has made strides in recent years in many areas – such as with the Greenbelt, the PPS, the Natural Heritage Reference Manual, and the Great Lakes Protection Act - serious challenges remain, in particular with respect to the need to better integrate synergistic visions across strategic documents and in the implementation of their regulations, guidelines, and programs.

We urge the Government to provide the direction necessary to ensure that the three initiatives cited above, as well as others including the GLPA, become part of a new, integrated approach to natural heritage protection, watershed management, and land use planning, and we express our willingness to discuss the challenges and opportunities with you.

Sincerely,

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cc Broad distribution to elected officials, agency staff, community organizations, etc

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