

Recommendations from the OHI Discussion Paper: We Need to Talk About Watershed Security

Recommendations for Provincial Action

Given the gaps described in the Discussion Paper, the OHI suggests extensive discussion on shifting to an Outcomes-based Framework for Watershed Security, including recommendations that:

1. Ontario should pursue an amendment to or new annex in the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health on increased federal / provincial cooperation on watershed security, perhaps based on existing collaborative efforts to address nutrient flow to and algae in Lake Erie;
2. Ontario should establish natural heritage targets, similar to those in the federal guideline How Much Habitat is Enough, such as agreed percentages of a watercourse to be in natural heritage, wetlands, and streamside vegetation, with mechanisms to set restoration goals where a watershed is below target;
3. The Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan, which was posted to the province's Environmental Registry in November of 2018 and includes commitments on water but has never been approved, should be re-posted to the Registry and the subject of extensive consultation;
4. Key Ontario ministries involved in protecting water, watersheds, and their biodiversity should hold internal, cross-ministry, and public consultations on how to deliver watershed security;
5. The Province should restore its archived Wetland Policy and rescind recent amendments to the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System that limit the future identification of provincially significant wetlands;
6. Ontario should revoke the blanket ability of aggregate extraction sites to operate below the water table and instead develop an appropriate protocol to protect and monitor groundwater on a site-by-site basis;
7. In the Provincial Planning Statement (PPS), Ontario should:
 - a. Reinforce the obligation that planning authorities shall “protect, improve or restore the quality and quantity of water by...using the watershed as the ecologically meaningful scale for integrated and long-term planning”;
 - b. Reinstate the consideration of climate change impacts as a key consideration in protecting water;
 - c. Require full watershed studies based on an ecosystem approach while precluding the use of “equivalent” watershed studies and/or a landscape features approach to planning;
 - d. Ensure that municipalities include the identification and mapping of Significant Surface Water Contribution Areas in their official plans; and,
 - e. Move expeditiously to create and implement the cumulative monitoring referred to in s. 4.2;
8. Ontario should establish triggers, lead agencies, and a protocol for action when monitoring results indicate that a Provincial Water Quality Objective has been exceeded;
9. Ontario should establish a new standard for salt in surface waters, with triggers and protocols for action by lead agencies;
10. All municipalities in Ontario should be required to have a permitting system for site alteration, especially as such might impact water, with appropriate measures for inspection, halt-work orders, and adjudication;
11. Minister's Zoning Orders should require a “certificate on the non-impairment of watershed security” from a designated agency such as a conservation authority or the Ministry of Natural Resources; and,
12. Concerns about the quality and quantity of water in, flowing through, or downstream from development being considered by a planning authority should be re-instated as eligible criteria for appeals to the Ontario Land Tribunal;

Key Aspects of the Municipal Charter for Watershed Security

That Councils develop a Municipal Charter for Watershed Security based on the following eight actions:

- Adopting a council motion to integrate land use and watershed planning;
- Committing to a whole watershed approach, seeking normal flows of clean water entering the municipality from areas upstream as well as to assure the same for communities downstream;
- Using aquatic and terrestrial studies to identify and protect key ecological features and functions;
- Directing early efforts in key municipal departments, such as economic development, permitting, transportation, and works, to integrate their responsibilities for land use and watershed planning, including the consideration of climate change and the need to protect biodiversity;
- Establishing watershed and/or sub-watershed targets, including restoration targets where needed, for areas in natural heritage, wetlands, streamside vegetation, and urban canopies;
- Ensuring before and after terrestrial and aquatic monitoring of significant developments, including infrastructure projects, as identified in a municipal protocol;
- Using watershed reports and applying adaptive management to redress poor watershed conditions; and,
- Encouraging sound stewardship practices on all land in the municipality.

The OHI offers these suggested actions so that municipalities can address local priorities and resources in a practical and flexible manner. We also suggest that many aspects related to the development and successful implementation of a charter would benefit from broad community engagement. We are available to discuss the development of a local Charter with any municipality, at its convenience.

A Revitalized and Expanded Mandate for Watershed Management Agencies

As CAs are directed by the Province, we offer these recommendations for discussion - that Ontario:

1. Restore the mandates for watershed management and the conservation of land to all CAs and extend these mandates to similar watershed management agencies;
2. Revoke the restrictions on conservation authorities to comment on municipal planning instruments as well as to initiate or to be a party to an appeal to the Ontario Land Tribunal;
3. Harmonize conservation authority policies required under provincial direction regarding Development, Interference with Wetlands, and Alterations to Shorelines and Watercourses, perhaps using the guidelines in the Ontario Natural Heritage Reference Manual;
4. Direct conservation authorities to hold public meetings on the results of their individual watershed report cards, focused in particular on identifying priorities for adaptive management, including how to engage landowners in improved stewardship practices where needed;
5. Direct and provide support to a lead agency, such as Conservation Ontario, to maintain and improve CA watershed report cards, including a mandate to facilitate inter-agency discussions on how to implement cumulative monitoring, potentially to include other provincial reports on water and watersheds;
6. Retain the role of conservation authorities in Source Water Protection;
7. Direct and provide support to a lead organization, such as Conservation Ontario, to facilitate discussions on the creation of Regional Water Boards, to receive, review, and help formulate responses to poor results in all watershed-based report cards per item 6 above, perhaps based on their role in facilitating efforts on source water protection;
8. Provide support to a lead organization, such as Conservation Ontario, to consider establishing a fee-for-service Watershed Security Bureau to help provide CA expertise where it may be as needed; and,
9. Expand the mandate of CAs to apply their expertise in both watershed management and the conservation of land to lead a massive effort to enlarge existing and/or establish new Greenbelt-style core and corridor natural heritage areas, especially in areas of anticipated high population growth.