

## Recommendations for Conservation Authorities: April 22, 2025

### A Revitalized and Expanded Role in Watershed Security



Having invented and then cultivated watershed management for about 70 years, Ontario has purposefully backed away from its commitments to watershed health since 2018.

Over the last seven years, the Conservation Authorities Act has been significantly amended, with “watershed management”, “pollution”, and “the conservation of land” having been deleted from their mandate. Magnifying the harm caused by the elimination of regional planning and the reduction of other environmental safeguards, conservation authorities (CAs) are also no longer able to comment on draft municipal official plans and cannot initiate nor be a party to an appeal to the Ontario Land Tribunal.

These changes are bad enough in normal times, but spell disaster for watershed security and biodiversity at a time of significant population growth, climate change, and a provincial preference for low-density sprawl rather than compact, low-carbon, complete communities.

Worse, much of this sprawl is taking the form of secondary land conversion across South-central Ontario. Following initial, relatively modest municipal development from about 1800 to 1945, current municipal expansion is converting vast areas of natural heritage and agricultural land to impervious surfaces. This expansion will significantly impact our already-diminished and fragmented natural areas, biodiversity, and food security, while threatening watershed norms for water quantity, water quality, and temperature.

Consistent with our position that land use and watershed planning should be integrated at the municipal level, CAs retain a meaningful ability to guide efforts toward watershed security, especially with respect to the threat represented by extensive population growth and secondary land conversion. Key recommendations are that:

- Ontario restore the mandates for watershed management, pollution, and the conservation of land in the Conservation Authorities Act;
- Ontario revoke the restrictions on conservation authorities from commenting on municipal planning instruments as well as to initiate or to be a party to an appeal to the Ontario Land Tribunal;
- Ontario work with Conservation Ontario, the collective entity of all 36 conservation authorities, to harmonize conservation authority policies required under provincial direction for Development, Interference with Wetlands, and Alterations to Shorelines and Watercourses, perhaps using the guidelines in the Ontario Natural Heritage Reference Manual;
- Ontario direct and provide support to Conservation Ontario to maintain and improve Conservation authority report cards, with extensive public consultation;
- Ontario direct and provide support to Conservation Ontario to co-lead discussions, with the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation, and Parks, on the creation of Regional Water Boards to receive, review, and formulate responses to watershed-based report cards, including those on drinking water and biodiversity, perhaps based on the existing conservation authority role in source protection, which should be retained;
- Ontario direct and provide support to Conservation Ontario to co-lead an initiative with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario on the establishment of a fee-based Watershed Management Service Bureau to help municipalities integrate land use and watershed planning; and,
- Ontario direct and provide support to Conservation Ontario to co-lead, with appropriate ministries, a massive effort to identify areas to enlarge or create new Greenbelt-style core and corridor natural heritage areas as a counter-balance to the extensive secondary land conversion now taking place across South-central Ontario, especially in areas of anticipated high population growth

**This last initiative would constitute the basis of a multi-generation effort to safeguard our watersheds, their biodiversity, and agricultural land; reduce environmental risk and avoid the future costs of reduced natural assets; and help deliver nature-based solutions to address the climate crisis.**