

The Ontario Headwaters Institute
Promoting Watershed Security in Ontario

**Generic Presentation on Shifting Ontario
to an Outcomes-based Framework for Watershed Security**

April 2025

About the OHI

- The OHI is an Ontario corporation that obtained charitable status in 2004.
- Originally focused on headwater health, our mission evolved in 2017 to addressing full watershed management and, in 2024, to Promoting Watershed Security in Ontario.
- We define watershed security as healthy and resilient watersheds that protect regional ecological integrity, social wellbeing, and economic vitality.



Why Did the OHI Move to Watershed Security?

- Most people's eyes glaze over fairly quickly in conversations about watershed management, which has many regulatory and geographic complexities;
- Watershed management has become diluted and fragmented across Ontario, and is not being delivered in an equitable manner across different regions;
- Planning authorities are not honouring their obligations under s. 4.2.1 of the Provincial Planning Statement to “use the watershed as the meaningful scale for planning”, nor to “minimize negative impacts on water”.

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As a result, the OHI believes that Ontario should discuss replacing the current approach to watershed management with an Outcomes-based Framework for Watershed Security, integrating land use and watershed planning at the municipal level.

To move this forward, the OHI Released a Discussion Paper, “We Need to Talk About Watershed Security”, which

- Includes a history of the evolution of the world’s first systemic approach to watershed management, aligned with other environmental safeguards such as an award-winning land use policy statement, the world’s largest greenbelt, one of the world’s first environmental bill of rights, and more;
- Describes the emergence of policy and implementation gaps, such as un-even policies or resources in different areas, and reduced provincial funding for and then cuts to the mandates of conservation authorities; and,
- Depicts the more recent and significant reductions to both the province’s overall environmental safeguards and its approach to watershed management, implemented mostly to facilitate Ontario’s Housing Action Plan.

The Discussion Paper

- **Calls for extensive consultation on replacing the current with an Outcomes-based Framework for Watershed Security, including 26 recommendations in three sections.**
- **Part 1: Restoring the Provincial Vision to Protect our Watersheds, with 11 suggestions for discussion;**
- **Part 2: Integrating Land Use and Watershed Planning at the municipal level, with 8 suggestions for discussion; and,**
- **Part 3: Revitalizing and Expanding Role of Conservation Authorities, with 7 suggestions for discussion;**

Part 1: Recommendations for Provincial Discussion (1/2)

- **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;
- **Ontario should amend the Provincial Planning Statement**, including that it reinforce the obligation that planning authorities:
 - **Protect, improve or restore the quality and quantity of water;**
 - **Minimize negative impacts on water; and,**
 - **Consider climate change as a key consideration in protecting water;**

Part 1: Recommendations for Provincial Discussion (2/2)

- The Province should restore its archived Wetland Policy and rescind recent amendments to the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System;
- Ontario should identify triggers, lead agencies, and a protocol for action when a Provincial Water Quality Objective has been exceeded; and,
- The Province should reinstate that concerns about the quality and quantity of water in, flowing through, or downstream from development be eligible criteria for appeals to the Ontario Land Tribunal;

Part 2: The Municipal Charter for Watershed Security

Given:

- The current gaps in the provincial policy;
- Growing threats to our watersheds from increased population and development pressures;
- The on-going and escalating climate and biodiversity crises; and,
- The obligation of planning authorities under s.4.2.1 of the Provincial Planning Statement to protect water -

The OHI considers it fundamentally important that Ontario integrate land use and watershed planning at the municipal level.

We have therefore developed a template Municipal Charter for Watershed Security that can be adapted in a practical and flexible manner based on eight actions.

The Eight Actions in the Municipal Charter

- Adopt a council motion to integrate land use and watershed planning;
- Commit to a whole watershed approach;
- Use aquatic and terrestrial studies to identify and protect key ecological features and functions;
- Direct early efforts to key municipal departments to integrate their responsibilities for land use and watershed planning while climate change and the need to protect biodiversity;
- Establish watershed and/or sub-watershed targets;
- Ensure before and after terrestrial and aquatic monitoring of significant developments;
- Implement watershed reports and apply adaptive management to redress poor watershed conditions; and,
- Encourage sound stewardship practices on all land in a municipality.

Part 3: A Revitalized and Expanded Role for CAs (1/2)

- Revisit Bill 23 in order to restore the mandates for watershed management and the conservation of land to all CAs, and extending these mandates to similar watershed management agencies;
- Remove 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;
- Harmonize CA 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;

Part 3: A Revitalized and Expanded Role for CAs (2/2)

- 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;
- Expand the mandate of CAs to apply their expertise in watershed management 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.

Further Information

- The full Position Papers, including the Municipal Charter for Watershed Security, can be easily accessed from www.ontarioheadwaters.ca via this portal on the home page:



Thank you

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**Water is Life.
Let's act like it.**

Ontario 
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