

**Submission to the ERO for 025-0416
and to the Standing Committee on the Interior
RE: Bill 5: Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act**



May 16, 2025

The Ontario Headwaters Institute, a provincial corporation with charitable status, promotes watershed security in Ontario, which we define as healthy and resilient watersheds that protect regional ecological integrity, social wellbeing, and economic vitality.

One of our key current efforts in this regard is publishing a series of position papers on the need to replace Ontario's diluted, fragmented, and ineffective approach to land use and watershed planning with an **Outcomes-based Framework for Watershed Security**. You can find an introduction and the first three position papers at <https://ontarioheadwaters.ca/watershed-security-project-updates/>.

Not only would prescribed ecological outcomes safeguard our watersheds, biodiversity, public health, and economic vitality, a framework identifying a clear lead agency for the outcomes would deliver goals that the Ontario government has been talking about since 2018: stream-lined, more effective environmental management.

Toward that common goal, we provide the following 8 comments and 6 recommendations.

Comments

1. The OHI appreciates that there is a housing crisis and supports the need for action. That action should be based on the principles of a low carbon economy and complete communities, and should not be taken at the expense of the environment nor traditional democratic and legal rights.
2. We have, on many occasions, expressed support for potential efficiencies across environmental legislation, regulations, and agency actions. The government has never asked for any help with that.
3. Unfortunately, the Ontario government has for years conflated the need for action on housing with a non-scientific desire and policy bias to reduce rather than adjust environmental safeguards to make them more effective while supporting ecologically and economically unsustainable sprawl development.
4. Regarding changes to the mandate and role of conservation authorities and efforts to increase municipal housing starts, the OHI firmly believes that it is not possible to separate land use and watershed planning. Cutting corners on today's watershed protections will harm future environmental integrity, agriculture, biodiversity, social wellbeing, public health, and economic vitality.
5. Over the last several years, the Ontario government has also run roughshod over democratic and legal norms. This has included efforts to amend as many as 40 acts and regulations in omnibus bills; to create special by-law areas in which the Clean Water Act would have been suspended; backdoor efforts to alter the Greenbelt; the profligate use of Minister's Zoning Order to end normal planning; and restriction of who can appeal development issues to the Ontario Land Tribunal.
6. The use of omnibus bills has been particularly deleterious to Ontario society. Organizations seeking meaningful consultation have been given limited opportunity to address the government, while there has been extensive disaffection from First Nations on the government's duty to consult.

7. Indeed, the consultation process has been so broken that the government's haste to impose its will has often resulted in third reading just minutes after meetings of standing committee, and/or the close of postings on the Environmental Registry of Ontario (ERO), with no time for the serious consideration of any deputations or submissions. This behaviour is antithetical to meaningful consultation and maintaining the trust of the public.
8. Bill 5 may be the worst omnibus effort to date. Its many failings have been well-documented by First Nations, a wide range of civil society, and in the media. In addition to the by-now normal subjugation of the environment to development, the invention in Bill 5 of "trusted proponents: and/or "designated projects" in "special economic zones", none of which have any meaningful definition but are at the discretion of an order in council. These initiatives represent a significant abrogation of Lord Durham's recommendations for responsible government and the rule of law in Ontario.

Recommendations

I The government should listen to the extensive concerns expressed by the public, policy experts, and First Nations and withdraw Bill 5.

In addition, the OHI urges the government to consider the following additional, constructive recommendations for sustainable development in a vibrant Ontario, each of which needs extensive consultation.

- II Develop provincial standards similar to the guideline in the federal publication "How Much Habitat is Enough" while working to better implement Ontario's Biodiversity Strategy.
- III Restore / renew A Wetland Conservation Strategy for Ontario, 2017–2030.
- IV Require municipalities to integrate land use and watershed planning, perhaps based on the eight actions found at <https://ontarioheadwaters.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Integrating-Land-Use-and-Watershed-Planning-through-a-Municipal-Charter-April-22-2025.pdf>.
- V Reduce the impact of secondary land conversion (the conversion of farms, at an average loss of 319 acres a day, as well as old aggregate sites to impervious surfaces) by expanding the role of conservation authorities and Conservation Ontario, with support from appropriate ministries, to lead a massive effort to identify where to enlarge or create new Greenbelt-style core and corridor natural heritage areas as a counter-balance to the extensive development now taking place across South-central Ontario, especially in areas of anticipated high population growth.

This initiative would constitute the basis of a multi-generational 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 and biodiversity crises.

- VI Increase the commitments in the Planning Act and the Provincial Planning Statement, as well as in similar initiatives, for sustainable planning, sustainable communities, and sustainable buildings.

Sincerely,

Andrew McCammon,
Executive Director