

Ontario needs to Develop a Green Paper on the Future of Watershed Management

April 2026 As Ontario's historic, world-leading approach to watershed management has become diluted, dis-jointed, and is being delivered unevenly, the Ontario Headwaters Institute suggests that its past excellence, current weaknesses, and a vision to address future challenges be the basis for a Green Paper on the Future of Watershed Management in Ontario.

The importance of this path is underscored by wide-spread concerns about the Province's initiative to consolidate its conservation authorities and create an Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, per ERO 0125-1257 and Schedule 3 of Bill 97, Plan to Protect Ontario Act.

Thoughtful criticism from municipalities, conservation authorities, scores of organizations, and probably the bulk of 14,000 submissions illustrate that the draft legislation lacks details on funding and administrative issues, excludes the proposed Conservation Agency from having to post on the Environmental Registry, and suggest that it be withdrawn. We note that Schedule 3 also ignores areas that do not have conservation authorities, perpetuating regional inequalities in how watershed management is delivered in Ontario, and agree that it should be withdrawn.

Uniquely however, the Ontario Headwaters Institute urges the province to instead develop a Green Paper on the Future of Watershed Management in Ontario.

We suggest that the over-arching goal of the Green Paper be watershed security, per the poster overleaf; that it be founded on aspirational and science-based outcomes; and that its development embrace extensive consultation.

Our top ten of issues for further discussion in developing the Green Paper are that:

1. Ontario should establish watershed-based natural heritage targets, similar to those in the federal guideline How Much Habitat is Enough, with a commitment for restoration where conditions are below target;
2. Watershed management polices should be harmonized across Ontario, and not just for areas under the jurisdiction of conservation authorities;
3. Ontario should establish triggers, lead agencies, and a protocol for action when monitoring results indicate that a Provincial Water Quality Objective has been exceeded. The Objectives should be amended to include safe levels for salt in surface waters.
4. The Province should restore its archived Wetland Policy and reverse recent amendments to the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System that restrict the identification of provincially significant wetlands;
5. Ontario should ban aggregate extraction below the water table and instead develop a more thorough protocol to monitor and publish data on nearby surface and ground-water;
6. Ontario should require the integration of land use and watershed planning at the municipal level. This can be accomplished by re-enforcing the existing directive in the Provincial Planning Statement 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, which can be a foundation for considering cumulative impacts of development";
7. This integration should include municipal / provincial cooperation to create or expand Greenbelt style core and corridor areas to balance urban growth by protecting regional ecological integrity and agriculture.
8. Concerns about the quality and quantity of water in, flowing through, or downstream from an area in a proposed development should be re-instated as criteria for appeals to the Ontario Land Tribunal;
9. 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 provincial ministry and,
10. Ontario and Canada should increase federal / provincial cooperation on watershed management. We suggest the development of an amendment to the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health, perhaps based on existing collaboration on nutrient flow to and algae in Lake Erie, and extend that across Ontario.

We and others we know stand ready to assist the Province in fulsome discussions on the Future of Watershed Management in Ontario and we urge it to undertake this meaningful path to watershed security for current and future generations.

Sincerely,

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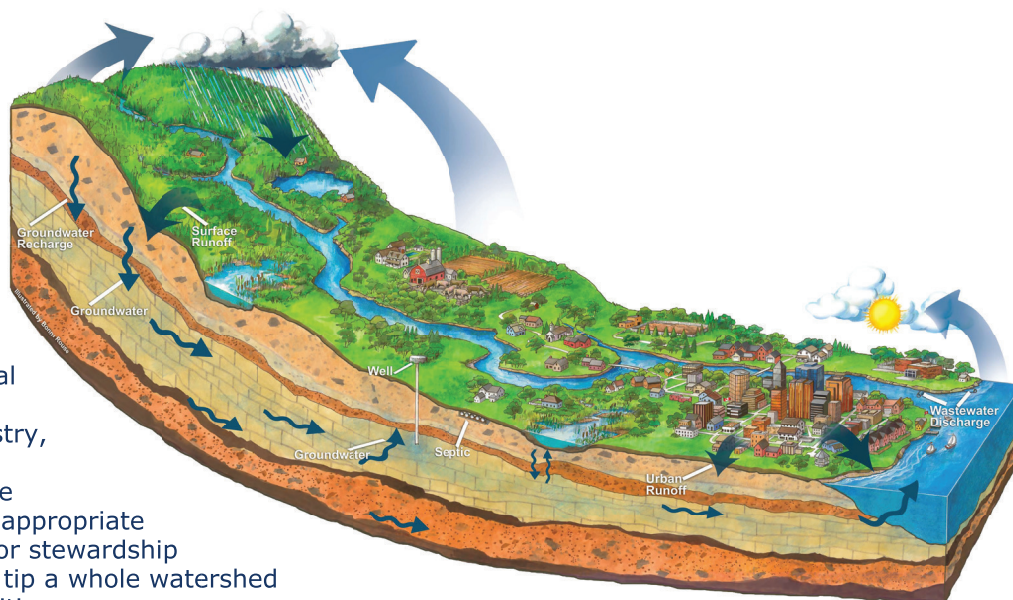
Watershed Security

The Hydrologic Cycle

Watershed security - healthy and resilient watersheds that protect regional ecological integrity, social well-being, and economic vitality - begins with the hydrologic cycle and flows through land use planning and stewardship practices. As water circles the planet, it courses through the atmosphere, surface and ground-water, and all living things. Global impacts to the hydrologic cycle from climate change include increased ocean temperature, sea level, evaporation rates, major storm frequency, acidity, and the disruption of ocean circulation patterns. These outcomes inform and amplify terrestrial impacts that alter climatic norms, regional precipitation, and freshwater ecosystems. In short, we can no longer separate local development from global climate change, nor land-use planning from watershed security.

Upland Areas

Upland areas act as reservoirs of both freshwater and biodiversity for whole watersheds. Usually with fewer people than live downstream, upland areas in Ontario can be impacted by rural industry that includes agriculture, dams, forestry, transportation & utility corridors, and aggregate extraction or mining. Inappropriate land conversion and poor stewardship practices upstream can tip a whole watershed from good to poor conditions.



Graphic Courtesy of: Conservation Ontario

The Midstream

The midstream can be characterized by reduced natural heritage, with more rural industry as well as small and mid-size communities leading to outlying suburbs. Threats to watershed security stem from more population and development, often in municipalities with a tax base too small to provide for fulsome storm and sanitary infrastructure. The challenge in the midstream is for communities with an appetite for growth to not neglect their inter-generational responsibility to protect the water upon which we all depend.

The Urban Mosaic

For the most part, Ontario's urban centers formed where key rivers meet large lakes. Forests, meadows, and wetlands were reduced as land was converted to agriculture and then an increasingly dense residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional tapestry. Historic stream flow and aquatic health were also disrupted as run-off from extensive areas of impervious surface that was drained by storm sewers that conduct heat and polluted flow, often with limited treatment, to our receiving waters. Sanitary sewage plants add to the mix, contributing their effluent, more heat, and what they cannot treat, such as micro-plastics and pharmacological products. The urban mosaic, perhaps the highest expression of humanity's social evolution, must embrace watershed security, sustainable development, and sound stewardship practices while reducing emissions that could further impact the hydrological cycle.