

April 2026 As Ontario's historic, world-leading framework approach to watershed management has become fragmented, diluted, is being delivered unevenly, and much of it has been placed under the vagaries of an emerging Provincial Conservation Agency, the Ontario Headwaters Institute suggests that the framework undergo a comprehensive re-visioning through the development of a Green Paper on the Future of Watershed Management in Ontario.

The current framework is fragmented as there are more than 40 agencies involved in watershed management just in South-central Ontario, as well as 444 municipalities, under numerous legislative initiatives. It has become diluted due to massive reductions in environmental protections designed to facilitate the government's Housing Action Plan. It is not being delivered across all of Ontario's watersheds. And its delivery in areas with conservation authorities has been placed in limbo under a new Provincial Conservation Agency whose mandate includes facilitating the Housing Action Plan which is excluded from the application of the Environmental Bill of Rights.

Meanwhile, Ontario is experiencing the extensive loss of natural heritage and wetlands, the loss of 319 acres of agricultural lands per day, and both floods and water shortages. In addition, of the 886 watersheds under the jurisdiction of the conservation authorities, forest conditions are in fair, poor, or very poor condition in 572, or 64%, while surface water quality in those categories number 463, or 52%.

Given the increases in urban sprawl being pursued under the Housing Action Plan, as well as due to a changing climate, these numbers will likely deteriorate, with the prospect of both more flooding and more moratoriums on development permits due to a lack of drinking water, as in Waterloo.

As a result, we suggest that Ontario shift from the current uneven approach to a provincial vision based on watershed security (healthy and resilient watersheds that protects regional ecological integrity, social wellbeing, and economic vitality), and that the shift be guided by the development of a Green Paper on the Future of Watershed Management in Ontario, founded on aspirational targets and science-based outcomes, each with an identified lead agency.

Our top recommended issues for further discussion to develop 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, to the highest existing standard where practical, 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 is not being met. The Objectives should be amended to include safe levels for salt in surface water.
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 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 on cumulative monitoring, as well as to create or expand Greenbelt style core and corridor areas to balance urban boundary expansion in order to protect 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. The governments of 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.